

# LITERARY CONCEPTS

## PART I

### Unit Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Theatre of Absurd
- 1.2 Epic Theatre
- 1.3 Method Theatre
- 1.4 Theatre of Cruelty
- 1.5 Poor Theatre
- 1.6 Let's Sum Up
- 1.7 Questions

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### 1.0 Objectives:

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1. The objective of this unit is to familiarise you with the literary concepts associated with Theatre and theatrical production.
  2. This Unit also acquaints the students with developments related to theatre in 20<sup>th</sup> century European Drama and its impact on dramatic works.
  3. At the end of this unit you will be able to know the developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century European drama with particular reference to the dramatists and dramatic works.
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### 1.1 Theatre of Absurd:

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In the year 1961, Martin Esslin coined the term Absurd to a movement in the theatre in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. According to Esslin, writers such as Camus, Adamov, Genet and Ionesco had become disillusioned and project the irrationality of life in their dramatic works. On the other hand, playwrights such as Beckett and Pinter began to question the human condition of man “. . . confronted with basic choices, the basic situations of his existence” (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 391).

Arthur P. Hinchliffe in *The Absurd* gives us a list of characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd:

- The substitution of an inner landscape for an outer world
- Lack of clear division between fantasy and fact
- Free attitude towards time
- Fluid environment that projects conditions in the form of visual metaphors
- Precision of language to understand the chaos of living experience

- Beauty and dignity of man lie in his ability to face himself as a human being
- Perceiving the absurdity of his existence

The post- world war period brought in a sense of disappointment, disillusionment, failure, unhappiness at the chaos of the new social order. Man started to feel absurd at his own existence and the playwrights began to articulate the sense of hopelessness around them in their works. The Theatre of the Absurd was greatly encouraged by the publication of Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* in the year 1942 that examined the plight of mankind searching for meaning in a seemingly purposeless world. One of the early practitioners of the Theatre of Absurd was Samuel Beckett whose play *Waiting for Godot* originally written in French in 1947-48 and produced in 1955 set the tone for the Theatre of Absurd. Along with Beckett other playwrights such as Ionesco, Adamov and Arrabal reflected on the idea of absurd with reference to Camus' essay about man trapped in his own human situation and his attempt to examine his relationship with it.

*Waiting for Godot* is more in the traditional farce and clowns and commedia dell' arte. However the play is significant in terms of the quarrels, contemplation of suicide, waiting for tomorrow, the bleak stage, trousers falling down, blindness, doubt, mixing the positive with the negative, silence, gasps, indecisiveness- all these culminate to bring out the sense of meaninglessness and lack of purpose and the reconciliation with the state of existence of man. Beckett's other plays that seemed to reflect the absurdist notion are *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*.

Eugene Ionesco considered himself as a creative artist but concerned with living and the exaggeration in theatre that distorted reality. Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* (1950) is sometimes seen as the first absurdist play but he described it as an anti-play. The play is a parody of banal conversations and situations of life. The language is replete with meaningless cliches carrying a logic of its own. In the play, *The New Tenant*, the stage is full of properties and the central character has barely any room to sit down. Most of the characters seem locked in a kind of hell where pain and laughter seems to come at the same time. Ionesco's other popular plays are *Improvisations* (1956), *The Chairs*, *The Killer* (1957) and *Rhinoceros* (1960).

Harold Pinter's early plays focused on bleak surroundings in which characters live in isolation threatened by an alien force that insisted on intruding. He has acknowledged his admiration of Beckett that is reflected in Pinter's plays such as *The Birthday Party*, *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*. In these three plays the setting is sparse, primitive, filled with a sense of threat and occupied by fearful people facing barriers to communication expressed in silences, repetitions, blindness and abuse. Pinter's most successful play *The Caretaker* (1960) projects the violence and threat implicit in Pinter's drama where the violence of the outside world stems from the internal emotional insecurity. Pinter's *The*

*Homecoming* (1965) is seen by some critics as a turning point in his playwrighting career. Pinter's plays depend partly for their shock value that arises out of falling into a nightmare, awakening the sleeper into a breathless, anxious and ready to relate the nightmare to the whole world.

To conclude, the Theatre of the Absurd was a post- world war dramatic movement that reflected on the dissimulation and disintegration of society and the crisis of existence faced by man in a totally senseless world.

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## 1.2 Epic Theatre:

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'Epic' is the description most commonly applied to Brecht's theatre. His early statement on the epic theatre was his notes on *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* published in 1930. In this essay, the modern theatre is the epic theatre he presented a table of contrary features showing 'certain changes of emphasis as between the dramatic and epic theatre'. In Brecht's view, drama and contemporary German drama especially invited its spectators to empathise with the emotional destiny of its central individual characters. Audiences were encouraged to surrender to the suspense and consolations of the well made play faithful to the unities of time and place and their naturalistic depiction. Brecht associated these conventions with the categories of 'mimesis' or imitation and 'catharsis' the purging of fear and pity outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Brecht was drama as illusionistic and individualistic, a reactionary prop to petty bourgeoisie morality at a time when both artistic conventions and ideology had been superannuated by unprecedented social and economic change. Scientific and technological advance and corporate capitalism had decentred and subordinated the individual. A new 'epic' theatre was therefore required which would be adequate to the new subject matter. 'Epic' would present individuals as socially constructed and malleable and above all introduce a new narrative accent and range.

Brecht approached his actual object in roundabout ways only. His epic theatre whose declared goal is to provide today's scientific age 'with a theatrical pleasure suitable to it' is a theatre of parables, similes, masques and fairy tales. Almost always the action takes place in faraway settings,

Brecht's early theatre stressed on didacticism. Later he moved towards a theatrical form that argued or presented a situation often termed as 'dialectical'. Brecht was more concerned with examining the situation in a dramatic action and what happened in terms of causes, effects and the nature of action. For this, Brecht believed that first the audience need not be involved in the plot; the audience would come to know through placards or stage directions or advanced information; second, Brecht did not want the audience to identify with any single character in order to examine the whole action from different perspectives. Audience is therefore implicit in Brechtian theatre. They are not mere spectators but needed to maintain their objectivity and identities and must not be expected to surrender completely to either the actor or action.

In order to prepare the audience for a non-supplication or surrender, Brecht devised a method to train the audiences called as the 'Alienating Effect' or to alienate them sufficiently and jolt them into awareness. The alienating effect could be achieved by introduction of the third person, the past tense, into dialogue to distance them, changing directions, altering emphasis or stopping the plot. Music, songs, stage directions helped to break the train of the play; sets would harmonise with the ideas and moods or contrast with them and the lights had to be harsh and white. Language and different levels of language and different registers such as slang, jargon, dialect, formal and informal also brought out the distancing effect in the audience.

Brecht's epic theatre provided a total theatrical experience where plot, message, entertainment, actor, audience, scenic designer and the director join for a shared experience. His theatre was one of enhanced perceptions that changed attitudes and perceptions not only in a moral way but also in a political way. Brecht's well known and most successful play and the classic example of epic theatre is *Mother Courage and her Children* that enables the audience to regard its own times in the alienating mirror of the past with anger, emotion and enjoyment.

Brechtian epic theatre had initial impact on the London theatre in the works of Arnold Wesker, Joan Littlewood in *Oh, What a Lovely War*, in the plays of John Arden, Edward Bond's *Saved*, a play banned by the Lord Chamberlain when it appeared in 1965.

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### 1.3 Method Theatre:

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The Method Theatre and acting is associated with the Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski. He along with Vladmir Neimrovich-Danchenko directed the Moscow Art Theatre when Anton Chekhov was writing and staged many of Chekhov's plays. Stanislavski challenged the 'technical' style of acting and infused the stage with 'method' acting. His views on acting are found in the books written by him such as *My Life in Art* and *An Actor's Work on Himself* also known as *An Actor Prepares*. The main purpose of Stanislavski's method theatre is to examine how one is 'to create the enchanting magic carpet of life's truth on the stage'? Stanislavski had major questions regarding the purpose of drama in recreating life's truth, conscious process of creation, relationship between active creation and re-creation on the stage and the audience watching it.

According to Stanislavski, to renounce all life outside his art would divest the actor of the basis of all creative work that consisted of 'a series of life affirming situations'. He believed that in art and through art, the artist is always busy and open to all kinds of struggles, conflicts and troubles of life. Stanislavski developed his method acting based on 'creative organic nature'. According to Stanislavski if the actor has to reproduce someone else's passions and thought processes then he needs to have a singleness of purpose, education: 'a whole series of tasks and exercises aimed at the attainment of concentration and attention'. He must divest his private life in order to arrive at this transformation. The actor must allow his mind to

open to new ideas, new thoughts and feelings, struggling to achieve greater depth of purity of thought, the creative actor can perform by achieving the 'circle of public solitude'.

In order for an actor to train as a method actor, s/he needs the following attributes:

- Attention- internal and external
- Goodwill
- Absolute peace of mind and repose
- Fearlessness

Stanislavski was of the opinion that the student actor must be taught how to concentrate all the attention on themselves, relaxation of muscles and switch from one set to another on will. The actor has to focus on concentration, relaxation and control of the muscles in order to enter the creative circle. The actor had to prepare himself or herself physically, then research into the part being played by observing past performances or reconstructing the part to be played. The physical side of playing a part was very important for an actor especially respiration plus rhythm together with concentration and focus formed the culmination of the creative circle for an actor. The actor must believe in the truth of what s/he is doing and the student actors must learn to forget their personal selves and focus on the character that they are going to play or enact. Similarly, actors must not simply play parts but they have to create the parts with concentration and alertness and without any clutter of the mind.

Stanislavski believed that concentration and mental alertness was the necessary traits for actors to be proficient on stage. He felt that fear would be destructive to both and courage was important for any creative work. The actor must also cultivate an important element of 'habit'- the habit of being tidy, methodical and orderly that are seen as vital characteristics for the actor. Similarly, the actor must also be a 'natural' in pose and gestures.

The ultimate aim of the actor in Stanislavski's method theatre was to enter fully into the real life on the stage not what was represented for an audience. The role of the audience was affecting what the actor did on stage in terms of performance. The audience would be gripped by the reality being represented on the stage. They must be able to grapple with the shock and involvement of whatever events are unfolding on the stage happening in their real lives as well only then the method actor has truly arrived on stage according to Stanislavski. Stanislavski's method theatre became popular amongst many young actors, American dramatists such as Arthur Miller, Eugene O' Neill and Tennessee Williams. Lee Strasberg in the year 1947 set up an acting studio in New York based on Stanislavski's method theatre and acting.

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## 1.4. Theatre of Cruelty:

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Theatre of Cruelty was proposed by the French poet, actor and theorist Antonin Artaud that became a major influence on the avant-garde 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre. Artaud influenced by Symbolism and Surrealism formulated a theory for Theatre of Cruelty in a series of essays published in *The Theatre and its Double*.

Artaud believed that civilization had turned humans into sick and repressed creatures and that the true function of theatre was to rid human kind of these repressions and liberate each individuals' instinctual energy. He proposed removing the barriers of the stage between performers and audience and producing mythic spectacles that would include verbal incantations, groans and screams, pulsating lighting effects and oversized stage puppets and props. He produced only one play titled *Les Cenci* based on Shelley and Stendhal but influenced the production of many successful playwrights.

Artaud's work provides a vision that stems from his violent hatred of realism. He wanted to transcend realism in his productions and produce a theatre that 'challenged' his audience forcing them to see new ideas and values. In 1924, Artaud became an active and influential member of the surrealist movement. He and the surrealists shared a political viewpoint based around anarchy and the free thinking and a vision of the theatre as 'a place not fit for bourgeoisie entertainment but for emotional discovery'.

Artaud was influenced by a Balinese performance in Paris and two other influences for his vision of theatre. One was a painting called "The Daughters of the Lot" by Leyden. The violent images in the painting had a theatrical quality to them and he considered the impact that such still image could have on stage. Film in particular in the works of Marx Brothers. He was fascinated by the manner in which they juxtaposed images to create humour. He further believed that traditional theatre was a slave to dialogue so focused on sounds rather than words. Screams were extremely important to him since they represented the most primitive emotion. Musical instruments were used in experimental ways.

Artaud's work had a tremendous influence on dramatic productions of Jean-Louis Barrault and Genet, Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz. Artaud proposed the principles of Theatre of Cruelty in the First and Second Manifesto. In the "First Manifesto" Artaud proposed a way of bringing theatre into contact with reality and danger by ensuring that theatre had its own language. He decided to break the subjugation of theatre to text and rediscover a kind of unique language that lay in between gesture and thought. According to Artaud, the unique language can only be 'expressive, dynamic spatial potential in contrast with expressive spoken dialogue potential. . . ' This kind of a unique language focuses on mime, dancing, music and mimicry, movement, harmonies and rhythms without favouring any single one of them. Theatre creates its own language so that our sensibility is put into deeper, subtler state of perception by assured



means the very object of magic and ritual of which theatre is only a reflection.

Theatre is concerned with the inner world and it must transgress the ordinary limits of art and words to produce a total creation explained in terms of production by Artaud as:

- The show will contain shouts, groans, apparitions, surprise, dramatic elements and brilliant lighting and incantations
- Staging- the stage will be the starting point of theatrical creation
- Stage language- to give meaning to words and the significance they have in dreams and connection between different levels of expression, rhythm, movements, gestures and music
- Musical instruments will be used as objects and part of the set
- Costumes- modern costumes to be avoided and age- old costumes to be used for ritual, tradition and give the experience of new dimensions
- The stage-auditorium to be replaced by a single, undivided locale without any partitions enabling direct contact between the audience and the show
- Objects-masks-props in the form of puppets, huge masks and objects of strange proportions
- Décor- no décor to be used
- Topicality on the basis of news and events
- Works- stage production straight from subjects, facts or known works
- Reviving the concept of an integral show
- The actor is important as he must be pliant and yet neutral
- Interpretation- the show will be coded from start to finish like a language

Artaud's 'Second Manifesto' was a shorter and glossed ideas contained in the First Manifesto. The Theatre of Cruelty will choose themes and subjects corresponding to the agitation and unrest of our times. Although Artaud's concept of theatre was practised by Peter Brook and Grotowski, it remains a powerful source of new ideas for improvisation, alternative theatres, experiments and new slants on dramatic meaning. Artaud felt that theatre was not a place to escape but to confront reality.

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## 1.5 Poor Theatre:

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The Polish Theatre director Jerzy Grotowski became internationally renowned with the establishment of the Poor Theatre in the 1960's. He rejected the idea that theatre would attempt to match the spectacle and effects of film and television and declared that the primary element of theatre is the relationship. Grotowski's form of theatre is often called poor theatre on account of the simple circumstances in which it takes place.

Grotowski developed the concept of poor theatre where the play and actor's technique inherited from Stanislavski focused on costumes, decor and lighting. The actor's research is based on body work that aims to rid themselves of automatic reactions in order to get to the character's essence within themselves.

In 1968 Grotowski was introduced to the works of Eugenio Barba who was said to be the father of contemporary theatre and introduced Grotowski to the modern world behind the iron curtain whereas Stanislavsky believed in theatre being a natural art form rather than a stage production. This led Grotowski to the works of the poor theatre.

In 1968 Grotowski wrote a book titled *Towards a Poor Theatre* that was able to show the main theory of Grotowski's work. It was that theatre would compete with television and film and that it should just be bought back to its original route as being an actor in front of the spectator. This he saw as the most important factor and the rest of the experience in the theatre was implied but not necessary.

During rehearsals, Grotowski made it clear that his actors needed complete control over their bodies and their breathing and voice, strenuous and rigorous exercises were used to achieve this. To achieve a Grotowskian aesthetic, the actor needed to engage both himself and the audience in a spiritual and almost psychic revelation; he wished them all to find something from within.

Poor Theatre refers to the aesthetics of the performance taken away. It is stripped of spectacle and superfluous decoration, grounded in the belief that the personal and scenic technique of the actor is the core of theatre art. Grotowski believed that the actors are in control in their part in theatre. According to Grotowski, poor theatre can exist without make up, lighting effects, costumes, props or scenery. The core or essence of poor theatre is actor and the audience; direct communication between them. Grotowski envisaged a minimal or reduced use of props though important in poor theatre. Similarly, he also researched how ritual songs also affected the participants.

There were certain influences in Grotowski's life that turned him towards the conception of poor theatre. Living with his uncle who was a Bishop made him a Catholic person and gave him ideas of theatre being a sacred place. He was also influenced by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century political scenario and war. He lived in simplicity all through his life and hence the idea of the poor theatre germinated in his mind. Grotowski also got rid of the excesses of theatre such as props and costumes and stuck to basics of theatre production and acting. He was influenced by Stanislavski for the ideas of realism and expressing real emotions from the actors to the audience. He seemed to be influenced by the ideas of tearing down the iron curtain and interacting directly with the audience.

Grotowski also contributed to changing the traditional concepts of theatre through experimentation in challenging the conventional aspects of it. He had complete commitment to his principles and methods; his theatre



became a pathway to understanding. He experimented in stage and audience layout and positioning with the removal of stage completely incorporating the audience as a creative component in the production. He made a powerful and tremendous impact on other practitioners of theatre such as Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba and Joseph Chaikin.

Illustrations of Grotowski's theatrical works in the background and reflection of poor theatre are as a directorial debut in 1958 with the production of *Gods of Rain*, *Akropolis*, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, *The Constant Prince* which is considered to be one of the greatest theatrical works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre and *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*.

Apart from Poor Theatre Grotowski was also renowned for and associated with theatrical movements such as Objective Drama, Art as Vehicle and Para theatrical phase.

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## 1.6 Let's Sum Up:

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In this unit we have learnt

- The inception of the Theatre of Absurd
  - Brecht and his conception of Epic Theatre
  - Method Theatre and Acting of Stanislavski
  - Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty
  - Grotowski's conception of Poor Theatre
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## 1.7 Questions:

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1. What do you mean by Theatre of Absurd? Give illustrations of this form of theatre?
2. How do you think Brecht achieved the alienation or distancing effect through Epic Theatre?
3. Analyse the significance of Theatre of Cruelty in understanding the chaos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century social scene.
4. Do you think that an actor is better prepared and trained through Stanislavski's Method Theatre?
5. How did Grotowski free theatre from the excesses of theatrical production and compete with film and television in 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre?



## LITERARY CONCEPTS

### PART II

#### Unit Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Off Broadway Theatre
- 2.2 Kitchen sink drama
- 2.3 Meta Theatre
- 2.4 Expressionism
- 2.5 Irish Theatre
- 2.6 Anti Theatre
- 2.7 Let's Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions

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#### 2.0 Objectives:

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1. The objective of this unit is to familiarise you with the literary concepts associated with Theatre and theatrical production.
  2. This Unit also acquaints the students with developments related to theatre in 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American Drama and its impact on dramatic works.
  3. At the end of this unit you will be able to know the developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American drama with particular reference to the dramatists and dramatic works.
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#### 2.1 Off Broadway Theatre:

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The Off Broadway Theatre is a professional venue in New York city with a seating capacity between 100 and 499 members. These theatres are smaller than Broadway theatres. An Off Broadway production is a production of a play, musical or revue that appears in such a venue and which adheres to related trade union and other contracts.

The Off Broadway movement started in the 1950's as a reaction to the perceived commercialism of Broadway and provided an outlet for a new generation of creative artists. The first great off Broadway musical was the 1954 survival of the Brecht's play *Three Penny Opera*. A number of successful off Broadway musicals such as *Hair*, *Godspell*, *A Chorus Line* etc. *The Fantasticks* is credited with being the longest running musical in the theatre history of Off Broadway theatre.

During the late 1940's and 1950's the Off Broadway arose as an alternative to Broadway. The term was used by the critic Burns Mantle as

early as the 1930's to define some semi professional or amateur production mounted in various places and locations in Manhattan. But Off Broadway theatre took almost a decade to achieve significance in theatre. When production at several theatres located mainly at Greenwich Village began to take a professional approach and attracted critical attention to plays. In the year 1949, five theatre groups came together to form the Off Broadway Theatre League and negotiated a contract with Actors' Equity that allowed the Equity members to work at greatly reduced salaries.

The off Broadway companies produced and performed plays that were artistically appreciative and different from the commonly produced Broadway plays. Most of the plays focused on the contemporary European and American works. The objective or purpose of the off Broadway theatre was not commercial running and profiteering of their plays but became a training ground for initiating and introducing many new, promising and upcoming talent in the form of young playwrights, young performers and directors. The off Broadway became synonymous with experimentation and innovation in theatre and theatrical techniques. The off Broadway theatre grew and developed in qualitative output in the 1950's with the success of Jose Quintero, plays by Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson were produced in off Broadway theatre followed by the avantgarde plays of Ionesco, Bertolt Brecht and Harold Pinter.

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## **2.2 Kitchen Sink Drama:**

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Kitchen sink drama refers to drama that appeared in the 1960's in Britain especially prominent during the years between 1956 and 1976. The kitchen sink drama comprised of playwrights not homogenous but seemed to have a direction that was unlike the avantgarde theatre. On the contrary, the playwrights seemed to have an ideology, message and a stance that was largely leftist in its leanings. The kitchen sink drama attempted to portray the conditions of the working- class people, their struggles and hardships; strong sense of community and the injustice of limiting and restricting their upward mobility. The kitchen sink drama was noted for standing against and raising their voice against the establishment and vehemently opposed regulations imposed by the government, corporate conformity and commercial exploitation.

Through realism, the kitchen sink drama depicted the common and everyday lives of ordinary people caught in a struggle against powerlessness, loss of community or the deadening influence of the suburbs. This drama explored themes and areas that were very different from the traditional theatre. The kitchen sink drama often dealt with young people caught in a domestic setting who protested against the establishment with direct, straightforward and outspoken dissatisfaction.

The phrase kitchen sink drama that emerged on the British theatrical scene in the 1960's ascribes to a kind of drama that expressed the ordinary through the usage of English poetic realism. It soon became the dominant form of British theatre of the 1970's and the 1980's.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “kitchen” became a powerful site of resistance, opposition and dissatisfaction in British plays. The kitchen sink drama finds a strong resonance in John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* that soon reflected in other British social realist plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The setting of Osborne’s play is literally set in a room flat in London where the living, sleeping areas and the kitchen are in the same room reflecting the lower or working class position of the Porters in the play. In this play, the kitchen becomes a space for discussions, debates and the angst of Jimmy Porter’s ravings.

Though playwrights like John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and John Arden were part of the movement, they did not identify themselves nor were referred to as “kitchen sink dramatists”. The significant playwrights of this type of drama were John Braine, Shelagh Delaney, Alan Sillitoe and Keith Waterhouse. Philip Larkin, John Wain and Colin Wilson were also part of the kitchen sink drama.

Kitchen sink drama was first observed in the medieval Mystery plays, domestic tragedies of Elizabethan period such as *Arden of Faversham*, *The Yorkshire Tragedy* and Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. Modern examples of kitchen sink drama can be found in the plays of D. H. Lawrence such as *The Collier’s Friday Night*, *The Daughter-in-Law*, *The Widowing of Mrs. Holroyd*. Sean O’Casey wrote about the working class of Dublin in plays like *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*.

The success of the kitchen sink drama lies in the fact that this type of drama seemed more promising and appealed largely to the interest of the theatre going crowd. At the same time, the kitchen sink drama appealed to the post World War II social scenario and the dismantling of the rigid class system that existed in Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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### 2.3 Meta Theatre:

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The term Meta theatre is coined by Lionel Abel and appeared in a collection of essays called *Metatheatre* in the year 1963 to denote “a comparatively philosophic drama”. Abel’s concept of metatheatre had its origins in the 1960’s when the prefix “meta” was used extensively by artists and thinkers. At the same time, Abel was also responding to Roman Jakobson’s literary theory on the six functions of language. According to Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, Lionel Abel felt that beginning with Renaissance, tragedy had run its course. Abel declared that a new form had succeeded tragedy as a dominant form which was “metatheatre”. Abel defined metatheatre as “a theatre not concerned with the world “outside” the theatre, but only with the theatre itself. His theory of metatheatre rested on two basic postulates: First, the world was a stage; second, life was a dream”. Abel then explained the particulars of the metatheatre in a miscellaneous and combined manner. There have been many critics and dramatists interested in the functioning of metatheatre however one particular definition of metatheatre offered by Richard Hornby stands out

as metatheatre is “drama about drama”. Metatheatre is characterised by self-reflexivity, theatricality, self-awareness and self-knowledge.

According to Abel’s notion of metatheatre, metatheatricality appeared in the Baroque and modernist metatheatres are considered to be the great ages of metatheatre. Abel believed that metatheatrical plays first appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. He also felt that Shakespeare and other Baroque playwrights already wrote plays about life that were theatricalized. Abel further brings out the differences between tragedy and metatheatre as tragedy deals with the real world whereas metatheatre with the world of imagination. Abel considers Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to be a real tragedy and *Hamlet* as metatheatrical play.

The features of metatheatre envisioned by Lionel Abel and enumerated by Thomas Rosenmeyer are as follows:

In metatheatre, the characters show awareness of being self-conscious, both about themselves as characters and about their status as actors playing characters, unlike the heroes of tragedy who carry out their missions without looking into themselves.

The characters’ dramatic life is already theatricalized, but are unaware of the kind of plot in which they are involved.

The plot is a product of the author’s own imagination and not rooted in a fixed tradition.

The characters tend to improvise and the characters and the events are always on the point of eluding the playwright’s directive.

In metatheatre, the action is marked by a dream or has the quality of a dream.

Closure is undermined, and authority subverted.

The language is self-centered, with words manipulated as pointers to other words more than as signifiers.

The audience is involved in the theatrical space and development of action

The play within a play is the central component of metatheatre.

Many playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht and Jean Genet. Abel considered the Theatre of the Absurd also a form of metatheatre. Luigi Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is a prime example of metatheatre and play within a play concept. Similarly, metatheatre can also be observed in Greek theatre such as the tragedies of Sophocles’s *Electra*, comedies of Aristophanes and African drama and Asian drama and drama in many parts of the world as well. At the same time, metatheatre as a concept has also been applied to feminist theatre to understand in terms of themes, form and performance.

With reference to metatheatricality, Richard Hornby identifies five types of metatheatre such as the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference.

Thus, metatheatre has been existent and practiced for a long time and can prove to be a functional and effective medium for subverting conventional forms, education and communication.

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## 2.4 Expressionism:

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Is a modern movement that began in the twentieth century. The Online Encyclopedia Britannica defines expressionism as “an artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather responds that objects and events that arouse within a person”. Expressionism as a movement was initiated in Germany in literature and other arts that was popular and successful between 1910-1925 the period just before the World War I. The main precursors and exponents of this movement were artists and writers who had in various ways moved away from realistic descriptions of life and the world, by incorporating in their art powerful emotional tales of mind that are expressed by distorted representations of the outer world. In painting and the visual arts, expressionism was chiefly found in the works of Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Edward Munch.

As a literary movement of the beginning of the twentieth century, this movement draws attention to almost all literary genres especially poetry and drama. There were two journals in Germany which published works of Expressionism in poetry and prose, *The Storm* and *The Action*. In expressionism the most influential literary form of writing was drama. The expressionistic theatre started in Germany and moved to American stage afterward.

Expressionism in literature arose as a reaction against materialism, complacent to bourgeoisie society, urbanization and the domination of the family within the pre-World War I European society. In inner workings of a person's mind by effectively turning them “inside out” and allowing mental states to shape their face, body and even the world in which they live. In theatre, expressionism resulted in a drama of social protest, in which representation of the external world takes second place to the inner turmoil experienced by the main character which is expressed via long monologue. This can be seen as a reaction against a comfortable, unthinking, uncaring and increasingly mechanized society. In expressionist literature, the physical consequences of a distorted situation are followed through as if it is completely real.

Expressionist drama flourished in Germany in the works of Reinhardt Johannes Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, Paul Kornfield, Walter Hasenclever. Bertolt Brecht evolved his own form of expressionist theatre known as epic theatre. These playwrights were largely influenced by August



Strindberg and Frank Wedekind and were considered notable forerunners of Expressionist drama.

Expressionism was a reaction against realism. It expressed the inner experiences by representing the world as it appears to the writer's mind or to that one of his characters. It concentrated on emotional, abnormal and troubled state of mind represents anxiety ridden modern man's despicable condition as trapped in an industrial and technical society heading towards a chaotic void. The expressionists aimed at projecting the inner conflicts instead of presenting the external situations of the well made plays. They sought to see beneath the surface. Instead of representing photographic superficial observations of a realistic play, they aimed at X-ray photography of the inner state of the characters to tap their stream of consciousness, to lay bare their dreams, inhibitions and mental state and treated the characters subjectively. The development of psychology by Freud and Jung provided the expressionistic playwrights with stimulation to reveal the inner spirit on the stage.

The expressionistic playwrights used symbols frequently to suggest rather than represent a character. They wished to dramatize man's struggle with himself instead of fighting with forces outside for which they employed different techniques and distortions of plot, characters and situation. They used asides and soliloquies to fathom the depth of the inner processes of the characters.

**The features of expressionism are:**

- Dreamlike or nightmarish atmosphere
- Non realistic distorted lighting and costumes
- Distortions in the stage set
- Pauses and silence of unusual length in dialogues
- Monologue
- Soliloquy
- The protagonist represents a class or a group was the victim of a nightmarish industrial society
- Typification, exaggeration and symbolic characters
- Film like sequence
- Alienated characters
- Using music, sound, effects, chorus, masks, dances
- Distorted objects, primitive or exaggerated characters
- Machine like movements, representing industrialization and mechanized people
- Distorted objects and actions in order to represent them as they appeared in the inner mind
- Foreshadowing
- Tragic death or ending for the main character
- Exploring themes such as poverty, corruption, loneliness or sorrow

### **Anonymous human types**

The traces of expressionism can be found in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Strindberg's *The Inferno*, *The Book Sonata* and *A Dream Play*; Wedekind in *Endegeist*, *Pandora's Box*, and *The Awakening of Spring*. Georg Kaiser used the saga of industrialism in *Gas and concentrated biography* in *From Morn to Midnight*; Ernst Toller utilized theme of rebellion in *Man and the Masses* and *The Machine Wreckers* and Hasenclaver made his *Beyond*, a tragedy in expressionism.

In America, expressionism found itself manifested through American popular culture literature of the 1920's. In the high art of the theatre, there was of course Eugene O'Neill's group of plays that can be termed as expressionistic such as *The Hairy Ape*, *Emperor Jones*, *The Great God Brown*. American artists found their influence for expressionism in some sort of realistic tradition in Theodore Dreiser's naturalism and in journalism.

Expressionism as a theatrical form declined in the late 1920's in Germany due to the advent of the Nazis who prevented and forbade all expressionistic works of art and it went into exile in United States and other countries.

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## **2.5 Irish Theatre:**

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The original Irish theatre began with the Irish Dramatic Movement initiated by Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats, poet and playwright. Lady Gregory was a wealthy landowner and playwright and used her energy in establishing the Irish theatre movement and the Abbey Theatre that opened in the year 1904. Although there was apparently some religious form of drama present in Ireland during the Middle Ages, there are not many records of any dramatic performances before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, the first public theatre in Dublin was built in the year 1637 by John Ogilby who was a Scottish dancing master.

The Irish theatre movement was truly nationalistic in its approach and ideals. It aimed for an independence of the Irish theatre from the European theatre trends and popular control and wanted the material of the Irish theatre to be native and poetic. The Irish playwrights drew upon Irish legends and history and the contemporary Irish life. Direction, sets and acting in the Abbey theatre were also considered as revolutionary and this established a new and continuing tradition.

### **Features of Irish drama produced by Irish theatre:**

Irish drama is radically different from British drama. The important features visible in Irish drama are:

- The plays were about families and honest banter between them
- An often bleak and sorrowful landscape

- Idiosyncratic rhythms of speech, different dialects and unusual sentence construction
- Honest, good and entertaining humour
- Naturalistic setting for example kitchen
- A general fondness for alcohol
- Real action
- Dysfunctional families
- Strong tradition of storytelling
- Ghost scenes
- Lively music, poetry and dance
- Element of magic
- Literary merit
- Intertextuality with other Irish texts
- Representations of family breakdowns
- Unionism and other divisions in political and religious beliefs
- Memory
- Love
- Courage of one's convictions
- Pain
- Wit and humour
- The dream to break away from the bitter monotony of daily life and hope for the chance of a new beginning

The Irish background, the Abbey theatre, the national consciousness and the view of the Irish and Anglo- Irish history are all important for an understanding of how Yeats came to be the kind of dramatist that he was. The Irish dramatic movement produced a number of humourous or sentimental quasi- realistic plays of modern Irish life. The Irish theatre became a popular theatre with the production of plays such as W. B. Yeats' *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), *Deirdre* (1907), *The Green Helmet*, *An Heroic Farce* (1910), Sean O' Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Red Roses for Me* (1942) and J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Juno and the Paycock*, *Riders to the Sea*.

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## 2.6 Anti theatre:

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Anti -theatre refers to theatre that shows any form of opposition or hostility to theatre. It also refers to a kind of theatre where the playwright attempts to subvert the theatrical conventions of the day. Anti- theatrical opinions have been formed on philosophy, religion, morality, psychology and prejudice. Opposition to themes, techniques, forms, performance, theatre going public, morals of individuals. Anti- theatrical sentiments have been expressed by philosophers, artists, playwrights and individuals.

The earliest illustration of anti -theatre was observed by Plato who dismissed theatrical performances are twice removed from reality. This led to a decline in theatre. Similarly, theatre that achieved greatest heights during Renaissance was banned during the Puritan era. It revived during the Restoration Age. Theatre and theatrical performances received strong opposition from individuals like Stephen Gosson and Jeremey Collier.

In the twentieth century, there was widespread dissatisfaction and disappointment after the World War I. There was growing disenchantment, degeneration among artists and playwrights of the twentieth century. They wanted to create plays that reflected the unease, moral decay, restlessness and meaninglessness of life post world war. The theatre and theatrical conventions of the twentieth century were not found adequate to express the dissatisfaction of the age. So, playwrights resorted to newer methods of theatrical expressions. Some of the prominent anti theatrical movements and playwrights associated with anti -theatre were Theatre of Absurd and the plays of Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Grotowski's Poor Theatre. These anti- theatrical movements gave a space for the playwrights to think about the meaninglessness surrounding man and society that produced many anti- theatrical plays.

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## 2.7 Let's Sum Up:

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In this Unit we have come to understand

- The functioning of Off- Broadway Theatre
- Kitchen sink drama
- The formation of Metatheatre
- The role played by Irish Drama in shaping the Irish national consciousness
- Expressionism as a dramatic form
- Anti- theatre as an expression of angst

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## 2.8 Questions:

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1. What is meant by Off Broadway Theatre? How is it different from Broadway Theatre?
2. Bring out the significance of Kitchen sink drama in the light of 20<sup>th</sup> century British drama?
3. Analyse the importance of Irish National drama with particular reference to Irish dramatists?
4. How do you think that Anti- theatre was an effective medium to express the anxieties of the post war society?
5. Enumerate the features of Expressionism with examples?



# STUDY OF SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR BY LUIGI PIRANDELLO

## PART I

### Unit Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Plot Overview

3.3 Characters in the Play

3.4 Themes in the Play

3.5 Let's Sum Up

3.6 Important Questions

3.7 References

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES:

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In this unit, we have provided a concise summary of the various aspects of the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello that can be explored and analyzed deeply. Therefore, students are advised to examine the text carefully in order to understand the symbolism in theatre, human emotions and terms such as the "Theatre of Theatre," "The Author's Function", "The Act Division" and other materials that will help them prepare better for the examination.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION:

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Born in Girgenti (now Agrigento), Sicily in 1867 to wealthy sulfur miners, Luigi Pirandello was one of the most exciting playwrights of the 19th century. After graduating from the University of Rome in 1880, he went on to the University of Bonn and earned his doctorate in Roman philology in 1891. He married Antonietta Portulano, a sulfur merchant's daughter, in 1894. Portulano suffered severe bouts of hysteria and other mental illnesses from 1904 onwards, causing great stress on the Pirandello family, leading Pirandello to institutionalize her in 1919 after both sons were captured during World War I.

His greatest contribution to literature was his plays. However, he also wrote short stories, novels, and poems. In 1934, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for "his almost magical ability to transform psychological analysis into a good theatre." In 1935, as part of the *Oro Alla Patria* campaign, he gave his Nobel Prize medal to the fascist government to be melted down as a demonstration of his support for Fascism.

Some of Pirandello's plays are in Sicilian, he also wrote novels and hundreds of short stories. Farces are one of Pirandello's most striking works and are often considered to be forerunners to the Theatre of the Absurd.

In 1895, Pirandello left the university to become a professional writer and returned to Rome. Pirandello began his career teaching rhetoric and Italian literature at several local colleges after his family's sulfur mines were destroyed by a flood. During this period, he published two volumes of poetry, his *Elegie Renae*, and a volume of short stories called *Amore Senz' Amore* (1894). Among the first major successes of Pirandello were *L'esclusa*, published in 1901, and *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*, published in 1904.

The impromptu play '*Six Characters in Search of an Author*' is presented by six characters who want to cast their story during a rehearsal. It is through the play that Luigi Pirandello's characters express their thoughts and feelings. Theatre is used to show the relationships amongst the actors, as well as with the audience, the playwright, and the characters of the play. In the story, the characters are socially disaffected people confronted with uncertainty and a lack of self-awareness.

The way Pirandello does this is by blending reality and illusion. The play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Pirandello explores the idea that a person is separated from their "self" and society. Rather than fiction, the play tells the 'real' stories of six characters on stage. Audience participation in a psychotic experience is stimulated by the unconventional form, language, and apparent plausibility. In addition to highlighting the distinctions between art and life, the play also highlights those between reality and illusion. By depicting the play as an artistic failure, Pirandello captures the imaginations of his audience and speaks to the state of mind of the era. The play presents various psychological aspects through the representations of the six characters on stage.

Plays by Pirandello continue to be staged abroad in a number of countries and in many languages, earning both public and critical acclaim. For a playwright to receive such widespread recognition is impressive. The artifice of the theatre and the reality of life were masterfully blended by Pirandello. The modern drama was transformed by his plays. Pirandellian theatre is intellectually oriented. He explores themes including the tension between reality and illusion, human complexity and diversity, and the tension between life and art in his plays. Pirandello was awarded the Legion of Honor in Paris in 1925, and he jointly opened with Mussolini his own theatre in Rome, the Teatro d'Arte (Art Theatre).

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### 3.2 Plot Overview:

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Play rehearsal takes place on stage at the beginning of the story. The actors and the manager enter the stage, seemingly to practice their roles before the performance. One of the manager's men, the "Property Man," is requested to read the checklist of each actor's costumes and roles. As soon as they begin to act, the 'Leading Man' starts complaining about the



appearance of his outfit. In the play, the manager asks him what the costumes symbolize. The man replies that he knows nothing about the meaning of those costumes. The manager also states that he is not aware of the symbolic meaning.

Suddenly, the 'Doorkeeper' enters the stage and informs the manager that he has visitors waiting for him. His speech is cut short by the arrival of a family of six people on stage. A character, 'the father', tells the manager that they have a story that should become a play. He asks the director to assist them in completing it. Also, he lets the manager know that they aren't real; rather, they're just characters for the play. As a result, the manager and the others on the stage disregarded them and resumed rehearsal.

In response to the manager's decision to send them away, the father declares that the characters will be brought to life by actors on stage. The manager is further informed that the play has only two scenes, and therefore, needs to be completed. 'The stepdaughter' informs the director at this moment that their play is quite comical. The Step-Daughter explains that one of the characters (the little girl) will die in the play while the other character (the stepdaughter) will survive and run away to safety. The characters are now beginning to tell their story as a family. There was once a marriage between the mother and father, and the two had a son.

One day, the husband decided to get rid of his wife (mother) by persuading her to elope with his personal secretary. The new marriage produces three children, including the stepdaughter and two little ones. In anger, the son, who is left with his father, accuses his mother of abandoning him. The father then attempts to reunite the mother and son. A mother and her three children move to the city to search for a job after the death of the secretary. Lady Pace's shop for dressmakers hires the mother to repair clothing, while the girl goes to a brothel to work.

As the story unfolds, the father keeps a close watch over his ex-wife and stepdaughter. On a whim, he visits the brothel to look for a prostitute. After meeting with his stepdaughter, he seduces her. The mother then shows up and sees her ex-husband (the father) before the two do anything. This scene is repeated several times in the play by the stepdaughter to humiliate the father. This is when the son points out that his life has changed because he has to deal with his stepsister's behavior and share many things with his stepsister. Moreover, she (the stepsister) claims that her stepbrother abandoned her on the streets of the city. In the conversation with the father, the director is told that the little girl sadly dies, the son commits suicide, and the stepdaughter runs away from the family.

The manager seems perplexed by the story but says he will develop it into a drama. In order to complete the play, the father asks the director to record every detail of their performance. He then invites the six characters to his office to work out the details of the plot. But when the characters interrupted their rehearsal, the actors became angry with the manager.

Likewise, they believe that the manager is crazy, just like the six characters.

This play blurs the distinction between reality and illusion as the characters disclose their fantasies and aspirations on stage. In his research, Mc Teague claims that the characters express their inner feelings, which help them resolve their mental problems. Actors or patients create characters without rehearsing or prereading. In addition, the characters create dialogue for themselves on stage. This allows the actors to become more aware of their and each character's psychological issues and feelings.

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### 3.3 Characters in the Play:

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Characters play a very important role in the play. In the same way that plot is the soul of tragedy according to Aristotle, characters can be considered the living energy of drama, since soul and energy are very important to living, so too are plot and characters very important to drama. The following is an exhaustive list of the characters in the play. 'The father', 'The Mother', 'The Step-Daughter' are the major characters in the play. 'The Boy' and 'The Child' do not speak in the play. 'The Son', 'Madame Pace', 'Actors of the Company', 'The Manager', 'Leading Lady', 'Leading Man', 'Second Lady', 'L'ingénue', 'Juvenile Lead', 'Other Actors and Actresses', 'Property Man', 'Prompter Machinist', 'Manager's Secretary', Door-Keeper and 'Scene-Shifters'. Let's take a look at some of the major characters in Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

#### I) The Father:

The Father is described as having thin reddish hair, a thick moustache, and blue oval eyes that are piercing. A man of both mellifluous and violent qualities. It is he, along with the Step-Daughter, who most insistently demands that the Characters stage their drama. He is in a sense the writer of the story, having created the setting of the step-family and, ultimately, an incident in which his Step-Daughter is inadvertently sexually penetrated. The play's two author figures, the Father and the Manager, are clearly seeking remorse, but Pirandello implies that perhaps a deal has been made between them. As a result, the stepson and stepdaughter warn against reading the play based solely on his word.

A recurrent theme of the play is the Father's role as a philosopher, occasionally stepping outside his role to speak about the inner workings of the characters' plans and the relationship between the Characters and Actors. Because of his excessive tendency to preach, he could be seen as a rough drawing of the author and as a double. He stresses the "reality" of the Characters over and against that of the company, a point he emphasizes repeatedly throughout the play. The Characters are "real somebodies" as opposed to "nobodies" because their reality-their drama and their role remain constant and independent of time. This reality is much more real than the

plausibility or codes of the "actionable." As a result, both he and his Step-daughter experience a sense of alienation seeing their reality portrayed by the actors.

## **II) The Mother:**

The Mother is wearing black and surrounded by a thick widow's veil, but her face is pale from an "intolerable weight of shame." There's a waxy texture to her face, and her eyes are always gloomy. As a horrified spectator, she watches the Characters' drama in all its anguish. Grief is her most defining characteristic, mourning the Characters' inevitable end.

In Pirandello's preface, he describes the Mother as incarnating nature without mind with her suffering: She knows nothing of the torture that has befallen the family, while the Father is able to perceive it. As such, she cannot even be considered a woman, she is a mother in despair. Her drama and role are inexorably bound up with the unchanging reality of her existence. Every minute of her life she suffers and her fate as a mourner is set for all time. She functions as an image of grief in part because of the two mute children, who are sort of accessories. She will repeatedly attempt to approach her estranged Son without success throughout the play, and this is particularly agonizing to her.

## **III) The Stepdaughter:**

The Step-Daughter, blazingly impudent and beautiful, seeks the realization of all the Characters' dramas. As a Character, her "reality" is a grimacing, fixed mask of vengeance. Stage-life is her way of vengeance against her father, which is illustrated in two principal forms that represent a female fantasy. According to the drama's description, the stepdaughter and Father play a significant role in the drama's traumatic event: an unplanned sexual encounter with a child that causes the original and surrogate families to meet behind Madame Pace's shop. Even as she mourns for her father, the Stepdaughter is exploited here. However, she also appears seductive, aggressive, and incredibly cruel when she is on stage.

As she says to the Manager, her perversity is a result of her Father's perversity. It is her obsession with the characters' drama that especially illustrates her perversity. Although the Father presents their play as a more cerebral drama that traces its players' She will conjure its motivations, its outlines, and its narrative arcs in speech, bringing its traces to the stage.

Among the props are mirrors, windows, and screens. In this spectacle, her stepdaughter also functions as the main subject. She wears her clothes with "great elegance," although she is dressed in mourning for her dad as a whole family. For instance, she performs "Prenez Garde à Tchou-Tchin-Tchou" with a cabaret-style display: her show would lure the company into realizing their drama. In her

memory of the author, the step-daughter shows her obsession with her self-image more explicitly. He reacted strongly to her efforts, as she tells his company, as she sought to lure him from the shadows about his writing table.

The other Characters gradually disappear from the room in her vision of the seduction, leaving only her to light the darkness. She would become a star because of the Characters' drama. She realized her self-image above all else on the stage of the drama.

#### **IV) The Son**

His fellow Characters appear to resent him and insult him because of his height and severity. As a rural child, he is estranged from his family and, in his aloofness, the stepchildren will be eliminated from the character's story. In the end, he will be a witness to the deaths of both younger children. It is in this role of an embittered refusenik that he becomes a character, a part of the household and the Characters' entertainment, to which he nevertheless remains a part. His sense of guilt, shame, and reserve seem to be a structural component of the Character's drama, which is caused by his look of scorn and exhibitionism toward his Step-Daughter.

Actors who attempt to imitate him are particularly offended by his hatred of spectacle. Like a mirror, the Actor freezes and grotesquely represents an individual's self-image, due to his inability to reflect it as he sees it. The Son also confronts the Manager, opposing the staging as an unrealized character, perhaps even one who represents the author's will in expressing his objections. In this context, he counters, the Father's unrealized nature is both the drama of the Characters and their attempted rehearsal on stage. His aloofness is what makes him the drama's very hinge. Act III contains a nonsense, that is, a scene in which the Son refuses to play with his Mother, which defines his position as an unrealized character. Seeing his step-siblings die in the garden, he flees into his bedroom, inhibited by his aversion to scenes.

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### **3.4 Themes in the Play:**

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#### **The Theater of the Theater**

In *Six Characters*, Pirandello presents a trilogy of the "theatre of the theatre." The plot of this play contains theatre elements that are generated by the tension between actors, managers and characters, in this case, a missing author. Pirandello considers the theatre itself theatrical—that is, it involves the forms and dynamics of the stage. *Six Characters* presents all of the theatre's processes on stage from the start with a supposedly daytime rehearsal. The play is therefore an allegory about the theatre. In staging a play within a play, it presents a Second Leading Lady and Property Man and refers to multiple frames of (self)-reference. The *mise-en-abîme*, which resembles a hall of mirrors, comes into play in plays that

explore the properties of their own medium. The self-referential aspect reaches a high point here. Several scenes include the actors doubling those in the audience, and the act divisions mirror those of the characters' drama. It is essential to this concept to deconstruct the established conventions of the "well-made" play, thereby demonstrating the play's internal workings to the spectator. *"Six Characters often appears improvised, sketch-like, as the Manager calls it as a "glorious-failure".* The rehearsal was abandoned, characters rejected and unfinished, and sets assembled in a hurry. The Father's confession could be anticipated by suggesting Pirandello was subject to the "Demon of Experiment."

### **Illusion and Reality of the Characters**

Throughout the play, the Father insists that the Characters carry their very existence with them in their form and expression. In Act II, the Father utters his most explicit sentiments about the reality of the Character. In this instance, he is enraged at the Actors' use of the term illusion because it is based on its base opposition to reality. This opposition underpins his identity, so he challenges it by facing the manager. The Manager readily acknowledges that he is himself, having been convinced of his identity. Unlike the Actors, the Characters' reality is real, while the Actors' is not; while characters are somebody but the actors are not. Because man is subject to time, he is nobody: He is a notion, subject to change, always prone to reveal itself as a fantasy, while the Characters' reality is eternal. Time enables man to draw a distinction between reality and illusion. As a man matures, he begins to recognize that reality is an illusion, whereas the Character is a timeless art form that always remains the same.

### **The Eternal Moments in the Life of Six Characters and their Suffering**

In order to sell their story to the Manager, the Father and Step-Daughter present the episode that crystallizes the drama among them: an inadvertent encounter they have in the backroom of Madame Pace's shop. During Act I, the Father explains its nature to the spectator in an existentialist way. In his view, its tragedy resides in man's belief in his unitary self. This only becomes apparent to him after he is caught in an act that completely determines him. According to others, he seems alienated from his own reality, suspended in a reality which he should have known. As a result, the step-daughter ought not to have seen the father in Pace's room and in turn, shouldn't have connected with him. As a Character, he is simultaneously suspended for being a pervert. In a similar vein, the other Characters remain bound to this "eternal moment." A key scene, for instance, drives the Stepdaughter to vengeance and gives the Mother eternal sadness. She releases her anguish in a final, climactic wailing, the Mother having witnessed this obscene exchange. In an eternal position facing this scene, the Mother can only survive "every minute of her torture."

## The Importance of the Author and the Author-Function

As Pirandello's play is being rehearsed within this one, he appears as the maddening native playwright who acts like a fool to everyone. These fantasies of authorship are inherent to literature. Pirandello laments in his preface that the author is not only what the characters seek, but also what the spectator searches for. The question "What is the author's intent?" hangs over the audience's minds. Despite his absence, the author looms over the performance. Like the characters, the player won't assume a body but will appear as a function or mask circulating among them. The play, however, does not mention the miracles and divine births that Pirandello talks about in the preface as symbolizing authorship, nor does it mention the Immaculate Conception. There the Father strongly resembles the author.

### Division of Acts in the Play

In the play, we saw that there were multiple frames of reference at work. The Father's speech about the fatuous comedy of human existence points out that these frames are also implicating the spectator's reality. Particularly in Pirandello's act divisions, this gesture of implication is evident. A similar effect to that seen in Act I will be witnessed in the conclusion as the so-called reality of the spectacle enters the audience's perception. The Manager agrees to conduct the experiment, and the Characters retire to his office. As a result, the actors join the audience, and the audience becomes their actors. The actor's chatter, in which they mock the Manager's authorial pretentiousness, makes them sound like improvisers, and reduces them to the level of improvisational actors, so they can add a sense of realism to the scene. A scene framed within the frame and staged within the audience would be a confirmation of what we were seeing as real. Real-time pauses, used simultaneously during the interruption of the action and during the intermission, also attempt to incorporate the stage and audience realities.

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### 3.5 Let's Sum up:

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In this unit, we have defined and discussed the introduction to the author Luigi Pirandello and the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Throughout the course of this unit, we have discussed the plot as well as some of the major characters. We have also discussed some of the important themes in the play, such as The Theatre of theatre. The Character's Reality, The Eternal Moment, Author function and Act Division. The fundamental glimpses of the plot and Characters help to understand the play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the study of these themes help the student understand the thematic concerns of the play. In the next unit, we will discuss the critical interpretation of the play and various critical aspects of the play.



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### 3.6 Important Questions:

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- 1) Discuss Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as a modernist play.
- 2) Discuss Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as a play dealing with the quest for Self-Identity
- 3) Comment on the role of the Character of the Father and the Daughter' in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.
- 4) Identify the various themes in the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and explain each with textual examples.
- 5) Comment on Pirandello's use of "Theatre of Theatre" in his *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

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# STUDY OF SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR BY LUIGI PIRANDELLO

## PART II

### Unit Structure

- 4.0 Objective
- 4.1 Meaning and absurdities of Life in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*
- 4.2 Dramatic Techniques used in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*
- 4.3 Faith and absurdity in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*
- 4.4 Let's Sum Up
- 4.5 Important Questions
- 4.6 References

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### 4.0 Objectives:

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In this unit, we have provided a brief analysis and evaluation of the play and various aspects of the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello that can be explored and analyzed. We will discuss the Meaning and absurdities of life, Dramatic Techniques used and Faith and absurdity in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Therefore, students are advised to examine the text carefully in order to understand the critical interpretations of the play and human existence and reality, illusions of reality. Thus, students are advised to read research articles on the play and other materials that will help them prepare better for the examination.

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### 4.1 Meaning and absurdities of Life in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

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Stephen Hawking has this to say about life: "Life would be tragic if it weren't funny. Laugh at the Absurdity of Life" Considering the absurdities of life as an important part of life then Pirandello's Play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* gives us a broader understanding of life and the absurdity of life. In his play, Pirandello mentions about life that Life has infinite absurdities and we come into being in many shapes, forms, and colors, including trees, stones, water, butterflies and women emphasizing the illusion of reality and identity.

In historical terms, the exploration of the human's mind and the desire to escape from illusion is an old problem. But Luigi Pirandello tried to confront our modern identity with the idea of recognition and a more accurate understanding of self-awareness. The author examined fixed beliefs in an attempt to reconstruct new ones. For him, in this play, he

shows that life is absurd and thus meaningless. All the major characters in his play are trying to get the meaning of their life and for that, they need someone who will provide meaning to their lives and thus they will get their existence and belongingness. Pirandello challenges both the illusion of known identity as well as the unknown reality of life. There are two groups of characters in this play: actors pretending to be in a kind of delusion and people who are literally wanting to be actors. So that being an actor they will get a chance to tell their stories to the audience. In other words, they will get their existence. F A Bassanese, in *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, asserts that "In contrast to the characters, the actor speaks of illusion and an artful imitation of life within an intricately organized system."

In the play, there are six family members who are seeking an author to aid them even for a moment. These characters were not just looking for an author but the meaning of their life too. Although for different reasons, the father and the step-daughter are seeking their authors, their ends, and to discover their true identities, to understand what led to their sadness, regret, and disgust. Blindness prevents them from seeing and they live as if they are fools. Throughout the play, the father, the central voice, believes that the identities of each character are determined by their roles as he says that the drama is in them and they act that role for which they have been cast, that role which they are given in life. According to the Father, no one will be able to fully comprehend his character, even if he acts as if he were acting true to himself. As an effect, besides his make-up, the effect would be based on how the viewer imagines him, as they perceive him, and not as he perceives himself within himself.

In the play, the father believes in a character that was destined to play a particular role in life with the function of showing those roles to those around him. He states that understanding each other is impossible if the words 'I' use have the sense and the value he expects them to have, but whoever is listening to him believes that those words have a different sense and value because he also has a private world. Further, he says that We think we understand each other: but we never understand each other.

As if they are truer than the real characters, they try to interpret again crucial moments in their lives. This authentic sense of identity in the characters makes them too different from actors even for a moment. This is what makes a character so unique. No character is able to claim an identity. It hurts them to be 'nobodies', but actors enjoy being 'somebodies'. Through their play, the six characters wish to change the tragic consequence of a fixation with the reality of their lives. There are no names in this play, so all the characters know each other just by their roles, such as 'Mother', 'Father', 'Manager', or even 'Actors'. Also, the mother lacks an identity of her own. She is a nebulous character who is far from being perfect, whose drama lies in her children, treating them as reproductive objects or better yet, as another person than a mother. It is clear from the name of the step-daughter that she is not a real daughter, and she is not a real wife either, despite the fact that she has the role of a sexual partner. A sense of unreality and incompleteness makes the father

search for an author. It is a pity that this man, even though he has experienced his struggles and made mistakes, has given his entire youth to his wrong decisions and to his inclinations, yet he is still far from the destiny he is destined for. Being nobody causes him to search for his soul, mind, and reality, and for the "self".

Alternatively, he may feel that he was an unsuitable husband and father, in which case he may ask himself, his family, and other people for assistance in discovering what his true-life purpose is. The question of what his "self" troubles him despite his knowledge of self-identity. A real person wants to know who he is, so he wishes to be seen as a representative of reality. It is mentioned in the play that while a character may know who he is as a man, it is he who does not know who he really is. According to Pirandello, such suffering comes from an absence of self-knowledge and harms just one person's soul and mind, similar to a father in society: The Father says in the play that he knows that people perceive this self-blinding as more humane but the contrary is really true and further, he talks about the animals that they suffer without reasoning about their suffering. But again, he takes the case of a man who suffers and begins to reason about it. And in his opinion, this cannot be allowed! So thus, he asks that man suffer like an animal, and then yet, he is 'human'! Here we see how the character of the Father is suffering from an existential crisis because he thinks that he does not belong anywhere and thus he is in search of an author.

His aim is to show how 'living' differs from 'being alive', and how the recognition of self in this life is what separates humanity from animality. Despite Pirandello's claim that suffering without reasoning is like living like an animal, there is no transcendence outside the unconscious part of the mind, nor do those who want to save themselves from animality have a self-identification. A lot of people prefer to suffer like animals while only a few curious intellects, like the character in the Father, are able to stand that kind of pain for a long time. According to Freud the unconscious instincts, the punishing superego, as well as the demands of external reality. This view of personal identity is not too far from the situation Pirandello depicts in his play.

Six characters are present in this play who are all living with their emotions, and their unconscious mind is superior to their rational mind. However, due to a lack of identity and a reasoning mind, the characters look for their authors to discover their true identities. The children in Pirandello's play are not satisfied with their parent's love, even their existence, and have no real parents at all. In Freud's view, nothing is more important than a father's love for his son, and so the Son will never experience the love and presence of his father in his life. Putting his characters in an ongoing journey of passing their id from ego to superego, Pirandello reconstructs the psychology of self-identity.

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## 4. 2 Dramatic Techniques used in Six Characters in Search of an Author:

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Study of Six Characters  
in Search of an Author  
by Luigi Pirandello  
PART II

Luigi Pirandello is criticized as having suffered from fashionable rejection without ever achieving fashionable acceptance outside of Italy. Pirandello's oeuvre of essays, novels, poems, and dramas has been the subject of surprisingly few studies and translations in English. Although not included on the list of Award-winning authors, he is still considered one of the greatest writers in the history of Italian literature. Publicly and critically, Pirandello's plays have been praised widely and have been staged in a variety of languages in a wide range of countries. Such global recognition is very important for a playwright. His works are characterized as difficult by Thomas Bishop, and his work is rarely praised widely since it is abstruse. In support of his claim, he adds that Pirandellian theatre is intellectually oriented. His plays deal with the conundrum of life and art, the mutability and variety of human character, and the creator's inner conflict. The artifice of the theatre and the reality of life were successfully blended by Pirandello. His plays introduced unique ideas to modern drama.

It is no longer possible for the Italian public to appreciate the drama of ideas that presented a detailed description of contemporary world life and culture from all social strata and echelons. They had already been familiarized with the thrill of a 'Grotesques' and its auguries through their war experience. Inconveniencing the past is what made the futurist furious and condemn the past. He categorically rejected certain conventions of old sentimental theatre, which he considered the most serious. The grotesque tone of his plays signaled the end of the old-fashioned drama. Starkie describes him as being extraordinary because of his distinctive philosophical approach and calls him a giant among these Lilliputians. Theatre grotesque therefore reacted to the sentimental drama of bygone years. In every country, one can experience the death of bourgeois well-made plays as well as the emergence of a new critical idiom that reflects the modern theatre mentality based on Pirandello's literalism and the Grotesque concept of theatre. Bringing Pirandello's drama to Europe, it is cerebral and critically praised.

Curtain up, the stage is a mess, and the audience finds it this way when the play begins. Pirandello's play *Mixing It Up* is currently in rehearsal. In this play, the dramatist seems to have intentionally mixed the two forms of theatre. Actors rehearse a play shaped as a well-made old bourgeois classic. However, the characters' dramatic entry interrupted the rehearsal. As the character is anticipating a resolution, the subtitle implies a development process, which is why 'comedy is in the making.

In this play, the playwright reverses the traditional model of assigned roles, which is based on written scripts, prompters' books, props, lights, sets, furniture, action, exits, entrances, and actors who synchronize to create the perfect illusion of reality. As soon as the Six Characters appear, the realistic drama of the original actors is gone.

Images and references are used frequently in the play, giving it a tangible feeling. In his study of the Father, Umberto Mariani examines his use of references in the following manner: 'we are here in search of an author', which expresses the character's feeling of a lack of definite artistic form; also, he compares the reality of the creations of art to that of living persons; 'living beings, more alive than those who breathe and wear clothes'. The concrete images of Sancho Panza and Don Abbondino provide the confirmation of immortality, 'he who has had the luck to be born a character can laugh even at death'. The dialogue of the son is full of imagery. For example, the use of the mirror imagery is brilliant in the play the characters mentioned that they haven't perceived that it isn't possible to live in front of the mirror that both freezes them and spits out their likeness. Thus, the dramatist used a wide variety of languages for people in order to differentiate in the genres of drama. On the one hand, there is the familiar language of realism in which the characters represented their drama, and on the other, there is the ideological language in which they argue for the importance of art and their role as 'characters in search of an author'.

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### **4.3 Faith and absurdity in Six Characters in Search of an Author:**

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In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello portrays both the faith and reality of human life and existence in a clear and direct manner. Through the portrayal of real-life characters and the characters in the drama, Pirandello tries to tell us the difference between reality and illusion and faith and reality. When the play begins, we can see a stage in a theatre serves as the setting for the play. In preparation for a show, some actors and a manager are participating and then entered six people who claim to be the inborn characters. These six characters are the Father, the Mother, the Step-daughter, the Son, the Boy, and the Child. All of them state that they are in search of an author. Management and actors in the original play thought it was absurd at first. When the six characters stubbornly insisted on performing their play, the others joined in. Their role as "characters" slowly faded into obscurity. They were only interested in the story because they wanted to prove their faith in the reality that they were also born characters. Sadly, however, all the characters perished at the end. As a result of falling into a fountain, the Child drowned, and the Boy shot himself with a revolver in the head. The shattered faith in their life led them to reach out to the audience to share their story, although, without the author, they could not do so. In their minds, the author was their only hope and their only hope of having their story authenticated.

It was quite difficult for the manager to determine whether the actor was acting or if the scene was real. He ordered the rehearsal to end because he was utterly frustrated. *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is Luigi Pirandello's attempt to reflect the current state of society and reflect on his own thoughts. With great conviction, the play portrays a sense of absurdity and faith in life.



Six Characters in Search of an Author was written by Luigi Pirandello during a time of doubt and uncertainty. Because of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, two world wars took place and other battles were fought. War eventually destroyed the hope of the people, and they became desperate. Eventually, they lost faith in God. In the play, it is suggested, that without faith, it is impossible to create certain states of happiness, that people spent their time constructing fictitious reality to give them a sense of security. Absurdism was born out of an atmosphere of doubt. According to absurdism, humans find two outcomes as they try to find purpose in life: first, life is meaningless, and second, life serves God. But absurdism also questions whether human existence is meaningful and the purpose of God.

Denmark's most renowned philosopher Søren Kierkegaard declared that believing in God would be absurd since no one could know God or understand His purpose. Pirandello's play is one of the great realist classics. By utilizing characters who are physically impossible, it shows disdain for faith in God. By referencing the word "heaven" nine times and the name "God" thirteen times, it mocks the blind faith that once existed. Historically, centuries of belief resulted in hatred and despair, which, in the end, questions religion's worth. The play is permeated by a sense of suspicion from the moment the six characters enter the stage. They are surrounded by a faint light, almost as if irradiated by them and their own breath of fantastic reality. The light disappears once they come closer to the actors. Despite that, they maintain a sense of dreamy lightness, almost like they were suspended.

In the play, six characters appear to represent spirits because of the tenuous light. These characters can almost be considered divinities. There are three parties responsible for depleting the light: the non-theists, the actors, and the manager. Even so, the characters still retain their innate qualities through the play. The stepdaughter tries to convince the other that their trust in God needs to be restored. In the play, she states that at that time, they were unknown to the public, but the next day, other people would act as they wanted and treat them accordingly. But then she asks the others whether they really want to see a drama or to see it flash out as it really did. Rather than letting appearances blind men, she considers they will understand what their nature is truly like. The eye cannot always see what the heart knows. They may see God differently than the manager, however. As the actors begin rehearsals, they are about to perform a play called "Mixing It Up." Just from its name, you can guess that it is going to be a play with mixed ideas. By showing the struggle between belief and doubt in God, it shows the struggle between belief and doubt. In fact, the manager cannot comprehend the existence of God in any way. In fact, the manager is unable to comprehend the purpose of the six people there on their stage. Over time, he becomes entangled in the plot as rehearsal goes on. He states in the play that he began to think that there's the potential for a drama here, albeit not a bad one. The story seems to excite him; however, it is actually an expression of his deep belief in God. Even though he tries to keep out of it, he is unable to escape from the six characters. Does he wonder if God might be able to change these six lives:

when the Father repeats the word “The reality, sir, reality! Manager: Pretence? Reality?” that suggests his concern of life and reality. In the play's tragic finale, the manager's budding faith is shattered for a time when the boy and child die. Having exhausted all of his patience, the Manager loses all faith in everything. Like in real life, he is disappointed when God does not change fates for the characters. Consequently, the manager believes he has wasted his time on trivial matters, so he doesn't admit that he had witnessed something that epitomized society.

Despite such a pessimistic outcome, there is still hope in this play. Characters' one duty in life is to act. The stage is their home. Applause is their food. At the very beginning of the play, the father announces their wish to perform; he says that they want to live. And then the Manager ironically asks him whether they want to live forever. And the Father replies humbly that they do not want to live for eternity but for a moment only and that too with him. Here We can see that the six characters are not just in search of an author but they wanted the audience to listen to their story too. This is their ultimate purpose and reason for existing. If characters find an audience willing to watch their play, then they have a chance of living again. Once again, they have the chance to reflect on the meaning of life on stage. It is like being reborn. As long as they continue to act, they will live. Though the characters die, the play continues. Authors who created six characters left them alone without a purpose for living and abandoned them. Thus, the characters decided to find a new author. In the play, the father says that to imagine the fate of some of these characters that he has described here would be an absolute tragedy. The stage allows them to be who they are and they live for the stage.

Initially, the play may appear tragic, but after viewing it from another angle, it is clear that there is a deeper meaning than what is written. Although the play was written in a time of pain and suffering, he also emphasized that readers should discover the meaning of the term "publish or perish". All literary works are similar in this regard, and that is what he believed and what he wanted people to think about. In this way, Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* demonstrates many other aspects of Faith and absurdity.

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#### 4.4 Let's Sum Up:

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In this unit, we have learned the critical analysis of the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. And discussed various thematic interpretations of the play such as the Meaning and absurdities of life, Dramatic Techniques used in the play and Faith and absurdity in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The playwright has brilliantly employed the absurdity of life and also aptly discussed the meaning of life and the importance of an author in the life of Characters. The use of the audience as a character in the actual play symbolizes the mixed nature of human life. The ‘play within the play’ is another important aspect of the play which has been discussed. The last section discusses the struggle between faith and reality that is the finest and the most illustrative example of Pirandellian theatre.

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## 4.5 Important questions:

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1. Identify the various themes in the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and explain each with textual examples.
2. In your opinion, does Pirandello's play illustrate life's absurdity and the struggle between faith and reality? Illustrate with suitable examples.
3. What are the ways in which the Six characters represent the absurdity in the play?
4. Comment on the importance of the 'Play Within the Play' in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.
5. Discuss *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as an Intellectual Theatre.

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## A STUDY OF J. M SYNGE'S RIDERS TO THE SEA

### Unit Structure

#### 5.0 Objectives

##### 5.1. About the Author: J M Synge

##### 5.2. Biography

##### 5.3. His Style

##### 5.4. About the Play

##### 5.5 Plot of the Play

##### 5.6. Summary of the Play

##### 5.7. Critical Reflection

##### 5.8. Characterization

##### 5.9. Let us sum up

##### 5.10. Important questions

##### 5.11 References

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### 5.0 Objectives

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The prime objective of this unit is to acquaint learners with the play under the study and to give insight into author's life, work and contribution to Irish Theater

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### 5.1 About the Author: J M Synge

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Irish playwright J.M. Synge is the most highly esteemed playwright of the Irish literary renaissance of the early 20th century. Although he died off in his late forties, he produced a modest number of works, his oeuvre has made significant impact on theatre lovers across the globe and holds a pivotal place in Irish Culture. To put in the words of Richard Ellman, J M Synge 'built a fantastic drama out of Irish life.' Synge, as recorded by Robin Skelton in **The Writings of J.M. Synge**, 'uncovers the heroic values and the awareness of universal myth with which the islanders enrich their lives.' His major works include **In the Shadow of the Glen**, **Riders to the Sea**, **The Well of the Saints** and his *magnum opus* **Playboy of the Western World**.

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### 5.2 Biography

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Synge was born on 16 April 1871, in Newtown Villas, Rathfarnham, County Dublin. He was the youngest of eight children of upper-middle-

class Protestant parents. His father, John Hatch Synge was a barrister and came from a family of landed gentry in Glenmore Castle, County Wicklow. Synge was educated at home and at times at schools in Dublin and Bray. Later his fascination for music marshaled him to study piano, flute, violin, music theory and counterpoint at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He travelled to the continent to study music, but changed his mind and decided to focus on literature. Synge later developed an interest in Irish antiquities and the Aran Islands, and became a member of the Irish League for a year. Synge died from Hodgkin lymphoma at the Elpis Nursing Home in Dublin on 24 March 1909, aged 37

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### 5.3 His Style

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Synge's chief concern, and the basis for his greatest literary successes, is the distinctive version of Irish-English that he developed. Like many other writers in the twentieth century, he sought to demonstrate the possibilities of idiomatic diction as a code for expressing intricate human exchanges and for creating ceaseless aesthetic experiences. There is no question that his travels in western Ireland brought him in contact with a folk language that inspired that of his plays. His achievement, however, was not the mere incorporation of something that he found, but an artful manipulation of vocabulary, syntax, and rhythms of Irish-English.

These linguistic features are evident throughout Synge's career, with *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World* representing, in different ways, the most masterful demonstrations of this style. In each of his plays, Synge depicts otherwise unprepossessing figures speaking in a rich, mesmerizing idiom that brings a sense of pageantry and splendor to the commonplace. What the plays assert as much as anything else is that language, the medium that expresses and surrounds all the characters, is perhaps their most valuable resource, without which life would be unendurable. Noted for its use of the particular Irish dialect of the Aran Islands, Synge's play has been treated to many retellings, including being set to music by Vaughan-Williams, in his opera of the same name, where the rhythmic musicality of the language is preserved and heightened by a thrilling score, where the surging and rushing of the violent sea and the chilling wind can also be heard.

### 5.4 About the Play

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Synge's one-act play *Riders to the Sea* (1904) deals with the lives and manners of a cross-section of humanity. While the play is concerned with local matters, Synge represents these matters with a universal interest. In other words, Synge, like many great writers such as Thomas Hardy, universalizes the experience of a particular individual or a group of individuals. Synge focuses our attention upon that aspect of life that absorbs the interest of humanity in general; his play has a timeless appeal because its content draws attention to something that is essentially human. The relevance of *Riders to the Sea* lies in its intensity of appeal and in its sense of contemporaneity.

At the urging of his friend William Butler Yeats, Synge had traveled to spend a few days in the Aran Islands to study the lives of their people. Synge was attracted to the way of life of Aran islanders; when he heard a story of a body of a man washed up on the island of Inishmaan, he decided to frame the story and the experiences of the commoners as a play. Thus, *Riders to the Sea* was born.

There are two themes working parallel to each other in this play. One is the sea, the theme that grounds all of the play's proceedings. The other is omen and foreboding, and the readers can predict from the title that something ominous is going to happen regarding to the sea. From the very beginning, we see Maurya, the protagonist, talking about her sons who sacrificed their lives to the seas. The whole play revolves around fears concerning the sea. Maurya also believes in omens. When Bartley, Maurya's only living son, leaves their house without her blessing, Maurya has a terrible vision and soon learns of Bartley's death at sea. In this way, the two themes amalgamate with each other and create a perfect setting for *Riders to the Sea*.

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### 5.5 Plot of the Play

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Set on the remote island of Inishmaan, Synge's intensely tragic play *Riders to the Sea* tells the story of an Irish family living at the mercy of the sea. Before the opera starts, Maurya has lost her husband, his father, and five of their sons to the sea. One son is still missing and the family is awaiting news of any remains being washed up on the shore. The priest has given Nora, the younger sister, some clothing which was taken off a drowned man, and asked her to find out if they belong to Michael. She and her sister Cathleen put the things away hurriedly as their mother, Maurya wakes up. They don't want to worry her.

Bartley rushes in making preparations to leave, and his mother begs him not to leave, cursing and scolding him for going. He has to take the horses to the fair, and he cannot miss this boat. At Cathleen's insistence, Maurya follows him a short while after, with the intention of giving him her blessing instead of leaving him with a 'dark word'. When she returns, she is distraught and almost in a trance. She has seen the ghost of her missing son, Michael, riding on the pony behind Bartley. For Maurya, this is a sign that her last remaining son will be lost to the sea. As she lists the children she has lost to the sea, the sound of keening confirms her vision. Bartley's body is brought in and Maurya prays for Bartley's soul as a bleak calm settle over her.

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### 5.6 Summary of the Play

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The play is set in a small island off the West of Ireland. The play opens with the introduction of two sisters Cathleen and Nora. Nora looks in from the door and asks where their mother is. Cathleen responds that she is taking rest. Nora, the younger sister, enters with a bundle that the young priest had brought. The sisters wish to see if they belong to Michael. The



young priest on the island said that if the clothes are Michael's, then it would mean that he received a proper burial. Nora augments that they should not tell their mother about this. Cathleen asks Nora whether she asked the priest if he thought it would be okay if their brother Bartley rode the horses to the Galway fair. Nora replies that he said God would not leave her mother sonless. The girls think if they have to look at the bundle. Cathleen decides to hide it up in the turf-loft for the time being.

But just then Maurya, the girls' mother, enters. She asks why does Cathleen need more turf. Cathleen, smartly explains about the cake, saying that Bartley might need it. Maurya, however adds that he will not be leaving today because the priest will not allow him. Nora gives her affirmation to that. She says that Bartley is already down seeing the boat. Bartley reaches at the cottage and asks for the rope he had bought at Connemara. Maurya tells him that he should leave it there because she will need it for the deep grave if Michael washes up tomorrow morning. Bartley disagrees. He says he will have to use it for a halter today. He believes that there will not be another boat for two weeks or more and he has to sell the horses. Maurya is indignant and says there has to be a coffin for Michael since she just bought new white boards to build it. Bartley asks why would the body wash up now since they have been checking for nine days. He wants her to consider that his boat remains harmless.

Maurya indicates to the rising star. She says that the horses are not worth losing her son. In response, Bartley turns to Cathleen and talks to her about collecting weeds and selling the pig. Maurya is undiscouraged. She says that if she were left with no sons, her family won't survive. Bartley asks Nora whether the ship is coming to the pier. She says it is letting its sails down. Bartley prepares to leave with a promise that he will be back in two days. Maurya calls him heartless for not listening to an old woman. Bartley takes the halter and hesitates for a moment at the door.

Cathleen asks her mother why she did not bless him, especially as there is already so much sorrow in the house even without him being unlucky. Her mother simply pokes at the fire. Nora and Cathleen realize they forgot to give Bartley the cake-bread. They are distressed and blame their senseless mother for causing chaos in the house. Cathleen gives her the bread and tells her she must go give it to her son so that the dark word will be broken. Maurya is reluctant to leave the cottage, but Cathleen tells Nora to give her mother the walking stick so she can get down there. Maurya grumbles but departs.

The daughters watch her leave and then grab the bundle. Nora tells her sister that the young priest said two men were rowing a boat and one's oar struck a body. Cathleen opens the bundle while they discuss how long it would have taken for the body to get to Donegal. Nora is dismayed to see that the sock in the bundle is just like one she knit for her brother. She becomes more disappointed and marvels aloud that a man who was once a great rower and fisher is now represented merely by a shirt and socks.



Suddenly, the sisters hear their mother returning. They hide the clothes and try to conceal their tears.

Maurya comes in slowly and sits by the fire. The bread is untouched. Maurya begins to wail and refuses to answer Cathleen's queries. Finally, Maurya replies weakly that her heart is broken. Cathleen looks outside and sees Bartley on the mare with the gray pony behind him and rebukes her mother. Maurya is still acting oddly, saying that she saw the most fearful thing. The girls ask her to tell them. She explains she went down to the spring and saw Bartley riding with the pony. As she talks, she becomes distressed and admits she saw Michael. Cathleen says that this can't be true, but Maurya explains: as Bartley was riding toward her, she tried to bless him, but the words stuck in her throat and she could say nothing; she then looked up and saw Michael, dressed nicely. Cathleen starts to wail that they are destroyed.

Nora wonders about the young priest saying God would never leave Maurya without a son. Maurya scoffs and says that her husband, her husband's father, and six sons have all died. The women hear something outside coming from the northeast. Maurya continues to narrate how all of her sons died. She ends by talking about Patch, who was brought in dripping wet even though it was a dry day. She then stretches her hand toward the door and women begin to come in, just as they did in the story about Patch's death. Cathleen asks her mother again about how she could have seen Michael, handing her the clothes. Nora looks outside and sees men carrying something with water dripping off of it. Cathleen whispers to the women, asking if the men are carrying Bartley. The women say that they are. The men enter and put Bartley on the table. A woman explains that his pony knocked him into the sea and he was washed out to the white rocks. The women wail and Maurya kneels at the head of the table. She raises her head and says that, finally, there is nothing else the sea can do to her. She need never pray or cry again when the wind blows and she will not care even when other women wail.

Maurya drops Michael's clothes on Bartley's feet. She speaks to him, saying it is not that she has not prayed for him but now she will be able to rest. She kneels and crosses herself. Cathleen asks an old man to make a coffin with the fine white boards. He wonders how Maurya forgot to buy nails. Cathleen sighs that she is old and broken. Maurya spreads Michael's clothes beside the body and sprinkles holy water on them. Nora whispers to Cathleen that their mother must have loved Michael more than Bartley because she wailed insanely when he died. Cathleen attributes it to her mother being tired of crying. Maurya asks God for mercy on the souls of Michael and Bartley and all her deceased sons. She adds that Michael had a clean burial in the north and Bartley will get a fine white coffin. What more is there to desire in such ephemeral life?

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## 5.7 Critical Reflection

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Riders to the Sea is a very short, with almost no plot and has very few characters. It's powerful and absorbing narrative is a hallmark of the Irish

Literary Renaissance. The brief work encompasses various dichotomies like humanity vs. nature, traditional religion vs. modernity, the community vs. the individual and the particular vs. the universal.

As part of the Irish Literary Renaissance the play recreated the spirit of the Irish language in English through using Gaelic speech patterns. It also celebrates the dignity and stoicism of the people of the Aran Islands. This depiction is intended to refine contemporary criticism of these people as backward and primitive. Indeed, while the poverty in which Maurya and her family live, together with the fact that the island seems extremely far removed from the mainland's industrialization and modernization, suggests that they are lagging behind, the universality of their sentiments and suffering elevate their archaic existence to one that is much more resonant and impactful.

Suffering and sorrow are what lend themselves to the play's categorization as a tragedy, though it lacks some of the essential hallmarks of that genre. Ruth Fleischmann writes, "Many elements of the play remind one of the classical tragedies of antiquity: the compelling structure, the foreshadowing of the tragedy and its inevitability, the element of guilt which is not personal guilt, the stoic acceptance of fate, the great simplicity and dignity of the main character." The characters do not possess any flaws like anger, pride, jealousy that bring about tragedy of Shakespearean kind. However, the tragedy lies in the implacable, insurmountable power of the sea and of fate. It is on the line Thomas Hardy's heroines who suffer without any fault of their own. Rather nature, fate and environment become the agent of human tragedy.

The perplexity at Maurya's behavior and beliefs is most clearly observed in her children. Nora, Cathleen, and Bartley are openly skeptical, and sometimes quite derisive, of their mother. This is due to the fact that, as critic Judith Remy Leder notes, the play can be read as is more than just a work about noble primitives: "It is an account of a cultural battle--- the play as a psychologically accurate representation of turn-of-the-century Irish peasants, rather than as an idyllic, romanticized picture of them." Maurya is on one side of encroaching modernity and her children on the other. Maurya believes in signs and omens. Her world is small and circumscribed, hence her reluctance to even leave the cottage to go down to Bartley. Leder notes that Maurya even uses "rhetoric characteristic of the oral tradition...her language is not easily dismissed. It is 'hard' and 'dark' and, as Maurya hints, should have the power to 'hold.'" She finds meaning in every small thing, as when she is handed Michael's walking stick and says, "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place, it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old". She also, of course, has a vision of her dead son Michael and is convinced that Bartley is going to die as well; this certainty is why she avoids giving her son the traditional Irish blessing.

By contrast, the children inhabit a more modern world (or at least they are trying to). They do not believe in signs or omens and refuse to orient their

life around the mysteries and vagaries of the sea. Nora is content to merely parrot the young priest's words, and seems interested in the wider world. She does not know much about island traditions and is generally aloof. Cathleen might be slightly more traditional (she is the keeper of the hearth and is more like her mother) but she too questions Maurya's blessing, supports Bartley's choice to sell the horses, and is frustrated with the tension tradition creates with modernity.

Bartley is not as outwardly disrespectful of his mother, but he is very much a transitional figure. He firmly belongs to the island, but he does not have his mother's fear of the sea. The sea is his livelihood, and as a modern man he thinks he can control it. He is obsessed with time and action while the island seems to exist outside of time. As Leder points out, he only has eight lines in the play and four mention the word "going," which demonstrates that he is always looking outward and desiring action. Finally, what makes him a transitional character is that he partly does hold onto tradition while at the same time as he throws his hat into the young priest's ring.

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## 5.8 Characterization:

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### **Maurya**

Maurya has given birth to six sons during her life on the coastal island lying off at the mouth of Ireland's Galway Bay. Four of them are already dead, along with their father and grandfather. She is old and poor and fears that the extended and uncharacteristic absence of her son Michael means he is about to be added to the list of her deceased loved ones. As if worrying that Michael's drowning weren't enough stress, she also doesn't appear to be very successful at persuading her other remaining son, Bartley, from crossing over to the mainland in a bid to deal away a couple of horses. In the end, Maurya has only her daughters to help with the cold comfort of knowing that there are no more men in her life for the sea to take from her. She feels at last a sense of peace and serenity now that her greatest anxiety has been lifted. At the end of the play Maurya moves more into a Christian realm through her acceptance of the events of her life. The emphasis is on the prayer, the Holy Water, the burial, and the afterlife. She truly is the image of the Virgin Mary.

### **Bartley**

Bartley is the youngest of Maurya's six sons. When Michael's death is confirmed, he steps up to become the family's sole financial support. His means of supporting the family is what gives the play its title: he rides horses out to sea and to the steamer ship, which must lay anchored far offshore. The horses are sold at a fair on the mainland. Maurya refuses to give Bartley her blessing after having a vision of his impending death.

### **Cathleen**

Cathleen is the eldest of Maurya's daughter. Cathleen is 20 years old; she commiserates with Bartley's position and is scornful of her mother's

superstitions. In contrast to the somewhat mystical bent of her mother, who is given to lamentations and omens, Cathleen is pure practicality in action, which is a great necessity when living with someone like Maurya.

### **Nora**

The youngest member of the clan, Nora is much more patient with mother's penchant for self-pity than her oldest sister is. At the same time, she provides a great sounding board for Cathleen to express her contrarian views.

### **The Priest**

The priest is never actually seen on stage, but his presence is so vital to the story that he must be considered at least as important a character as Nora. It is the priest who delivers the message through Nora that Maurya must put her faith and trust in a God that would never allow every last one of her sons to die while she is still alive. He is younger and more modern than Maurya.

He is a figure constructed from the words of the other characters, and their relative position in regards to tradition vs. morality determines how they feel about him. The children seem to take comfort in the man's easy and confident opinion that God would never leave Maurya without any sons. He is everything that Maurya is not: young, an outlander, comfortable, confident, and "modern." He is becoming an authority figure on the island to the extent that the clothes from the drowned man are given to him. He is a mediator between the island and the mainland. His Catholicism stands in contrast to the pagan spirituality of Maurya and islanders like her, but he is the interloper and is defied at the end of the play when the sea takes Bartley.

The young priest is a representative of the orthodox Catholicism that the island denizens adhere to, but this orthodoxy is constantly undermined by the power of the sea. Throughout the play Maurya in particular flirts with paganism, referring to signs and symbols and eschewing the priest's optimistic statement that God would never allow her to lose all her sons. Critic Denis Donoghue writes, "the thematic situation of the play derives from the inhuman power of the Sea, and Synge has placed before the eyes of his audience a representation of sea-death in the white boards standing by the wall of the cottage." The reminder of the sea's potency is thus ever-present, but Catholicism is as well. The focus on nails at the end is a reminder of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross. Donoghue believes that at the end of the play Maurya moves more into a Christian realm through her acceptance of the events of her life. The emphasis is on the prayer, the Holy Water, the burial, and the afterlife. She truly is the image of the Virgin Mary.

### **Neighbors**

Eamon Simon, Stephen Pheety, and Colum Shawn are the neighbors and friends of Bartley.

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## 5.9 Let us Sum Up

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In this unit we have touched upon the life and creative craft of the author along with his style of writing. Moreover, the detailed summery, critical reflection and characterization of the play Riders to the Sea is also explored.

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## 5.10 Important Questions:

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1. Give detailed characterization of the play Riders to the Sea.
2. Who do you think is the protagonist of the play Riders to the Sea?
3. Many of Synge's heroes suffer without a flaw of their own. Justify the statement in the light of the play under the study.

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## 5.11 References:

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# STUDY OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT PART I

## Unit Structure

### 6.0 Objectives

#### 6.1 Samuel Beckett: (Life and Works)

#### 6.2 His Role in the French Resistance

#### 6.3 The Principal Works of Samuel Beckett

#### 6.4 *Waiting for Godot* – Introduction:

#### 6.5 The Summary of *Waiting for Godot*

#### 6.6 Questions

#### 6.7 References

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### 6.0 Objectives:

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- To study the life and works of renowned absurd playwright Samuel Beckett
  - To study the impact of the play *Waiting for Godot* on modern theatre
  - To study the themes and elements of absurd drama in the play
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### 6.1 Samuel Beckett: (Life and Works)

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Samuel Barclay Beckett (13 April 1906 – 22 December 1989) was an Irish novelist, playwright, short story writer, theatre director, poet, and literary translator. A resident of Paris for most of his adult life, he wrote in both French and English. His work offers a bleak, tragi-comic outlook on existence and experience, coupled with black comedy and nonsense that became increasingly minimalist in his later career, involving more aesthetic and linguistic experimentation. He is considered one of the last modernist writers, and one of the key figures in the Theatre of the Absurd. His best-known work is his play *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Beckett was awarded the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his writing, which—in new forms for the novel and drama—in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation". Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in the Foxrock suburb of Dublin on 13 April 1906, the son of William Frank Beckett and Maria Jones Roe, a nurse. At the age of five, he attended a local playschool in Dublin, where he started to learn music, and then moved to Earlsfort House School near Harcourt Street in Dublin. Around 1919 or 1920, he went to Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, which Oscar Wilde

had attended. Further, he entered Trinity College in Dublin, to study modern literature, French, Italian, and English at Trinity College Dublin. Gradually, he was elected a Scholar in Modern Languages in 1926. Beckett graduated with a BA and, after teaching briefly at Campbell College in Belfast, took up the post of *lecteur d'anglais* at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris from November 1928 to 1930. In Paris, he was introduced to renowned Irish author James Joyce by Thomas MacGreevy, a poet and close confidant of Beckett. This meeting had a profound effect on him. Beckett assisted Joyce in various ways in research and critical writings.

Gradually, in 1929, Samuel published his first work, a critical essay entitled "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce". Beckett's first short story, "Assumption", was published in Jolas's periodical *transition*. The next year he won a small literary prize for his hastily composed poem "Whoroscope", which draws on a biography of René Descartes. Soon, in 1930, Beckett returned to Trinity College as a lecturer. In November 1930, resigned at the end of 1931, his brief academic career was at an end. He travelled throughout Europe. He spent some time in London, where in 1931 he published *Proust*, his critical study of French author Marcel Proust. Two years later, following his father's death, he began two years' treatment with Tavistock Clinic psychoanalyst Dr. Wilfred Bion. Aspects of it became evident in Beckett's later works, such as *Watt* and *Waiting for Godot*. In 1932, he wrote his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, but after many rejections from publishers decided to abandon it (it was eventually published in 1992). Subsequently, he published essays and reviews, including "Recent Irish Poetry" (in *The Bookman*, August 1934) and "Humanistic Quietism", a review of his friend Thomas MacGreevy's *Poems* (in *The Dublin Magazine*, July–September 1934).

Beckett published a book of his poetry, *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935). He worked on his novel *Murphy* (1938), which he translated into French the following year. He fell out with his mother, which contributed to his decision to settle permanently in Paris. Beckett remained in Paris following the outbreak of World War II in 1939, preferring, in his own words, "France at war to Ireland at peace". His was soon a known face in and around Left Bank cafés, where he strengthened his allegiance with Joyce and others.

Unfortunately, in January 1938 in Paris, Beckett was stabbed in the chest and he was nearly killed when he refused the solicitations of a notorious pimp, Prudent. After the Nazi German occupation of France in 1940, Beckett joined the French Resistance, in which he worked as a courier. On several occasions over the next two years he was nearly caught by the Gestapo. In August 1942, his unit was betrayed and he and Suzanne fled south on foot to the safety of the small village of Roussillon, where he continued to assist the Resistance by storing armaments in the back yard of his home. During the two years that Beckett stayed in Roussillon he indirectly helped the Maquis sabotage the German army in the Vaucluse Mountains, though he rarely spoke about his wartime work in later life. Later in his life, he was awarded the *Croix de guerre* and the



Médaille de la Résistance by the French Government for his efforts in fighting the German occupation.

During his escape in Roussillon, Beckett continued his work on the novel *Watt* which he had started in 1941 and completed it in 1945, but it was not published until 1953. After the war, he returned to France in 1946 where he worked as a store manager at the Irish Red Cross Hospital based in Saint-Lô. Consequently, it was in 1945, Beckett returned to Dublin for a brief visit and realized that he would remain forever in the shadow of Joyce that prompted him to return to the career as a writer:

"I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding." But at the same time Samuel realized that the Joycean principle that knowing more was a way of creatively understanding the world and controlling it. Therefore, he decided to focus upon poverty, failure, exile and loss in his works. He belied man as a 'non-knower' and as a 'non-can-er' - a helpless creature on the earth. This revelation becomes the triggering element and a pivotal moment in his entire career. Beckett fictionalized the experience in his play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958).

In 1946, Beckett began to write his fourth novel, *Mercier et Camier*, which was not published until 1970. The novel presaged his most famous work, the play *Waiting for Godot*. More importantly, the novel was Beckett's first long work that he wrote in French, the language of most of his subsequent works which were strongly supported by Jérôme Lindon, director of his Parisian publishing house Les Éditions de Minuit, including the so-called "trilogy" of novels: *Molloy* (1951); *Malone meurt* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1958); *L'Innommable* (1953), *The Unnamable* (1960). Despite being a native English speaker, Beckett wrote in French because it was easier for him thus to write.

Beckett is most famous for his play *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) (1953). Like most of his works after 1947, the play was first written in French. Beckett worked on the play between October 1948 and January 1949. In a much-quoted article, the critic Vivian Mercier wrote that Beckett "has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice." The play was published in 1952 and premiered in 1953 in Paris; an English translation was performed two years later. The play was a critical, popular, and controversial success in Paris. It opened in London in 1955 to mainly negative reviews, but the tide turned with positive reactions from Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times* and, later, Kenneth Tynan. After the showing in Miami, the play became extremely popular, with highly successful performances in the US and Germany. The play is a favourite: it is not only performed frequently but has globally inspired playwrights to

emulate it. This is the sole play the manuscript of which Beckett never sold, donated or gave away. He refused to allow the play to be translated into film but did allow it to be played on television.

Gradually, Samuel Beckett translated all of his works into English himself, with the exception of *Molloy*, for which he collaborated with Patrick Bowles. The success of *Waiting for Godot* opened up a career in theatre for its author. Beckett went on to write successful full-length plays, including *Fin de partie (Endgame)* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), and *Play* (1963). In 1961, Beckett received the International Publishers' Formentor Prize in recognition of his work, which he shared that year with Jorge Luis Borges.

Subsequently, the success of his plays led to invitations to attend rehearsals and productions around the world, leading eventually to a new career as a theatre director. In 1957, he had his first commission from the BBC Third Programme for a radio play, *All That Fall*. He continued writing sporadically for radio and extended his scope to include cinema and television. He began to write in English again, although he also wrote in French until the end of his life.

From the late 1950s until his death, Beckett had a relationship with Barbara Bray, a widow who worked as a script editor for the BBC. Knowlson wrote of them: "She was small and attractive, but, above all, keenly intelligent and well-read. Beckett seems to have been immediately attracted by her and she to him. Their encounter was highly significant for them both, for it represented the beginning of a relationship that was to last, in parallel with that with Suzanne, for the rest of his life." Barbara Bray died in Edinburgh on 25 February 2010. In October 1969 while on holiday in Tunis with Suzanne, Beckett heard that he had won the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Suzanne died on 17 July 1989. Confined to a nursing home and suffering from emphysema and possibly Parkinson's disease, Beckett died on 22 December. The two were interred together in the cimetière du Montparnasse in Paris and share a simple granite gravestone that follows Beckett's directive that it should be "any colour, so long as it's grey".

Beckett's career as a writer can be roughly divided into three periods: his early works, up until the end of World War II in 1945; his middle period, stretching from 1945 until the early 1960s, during which he wrote what are probably his best-known works; and his late period, from the early 1960s until Beckett's death in 1989, during which his works tended to become shorter and his style more minimalist.

Beckett is one of the most widely discussed and highly prized of 20th-century authors, inspiring a critical industry to rival that which has sprung up around James Joyce. Some early philosophical critics, such as Sartre and Theodor Adorno, praised him, one for his revelation of absurdity, the other for his works' critical refusal of simplicities; others such as Georg Lukács condemned him for 'decadent' lack of realism.

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## 6.2 His Role in the French Resistance:

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Beckett took an active part in the French Resistance for nearly two years, during World War II, and for the next two-and-a-half years he had to hide himself from the Gestapo. The circumstances under which he joined the Resistance throw much light on his character. At the end of 1931, Beckett, then, lecturer in French at Trinity College, Dublin, suddenly resigned, left Ireland and spent the next five years moving about Europe, sometimes in Germany, sometimes in Austria, sometimes in England, finally settling in Paris in 1937. When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Beckett happened to be in Ireland spending a month's holiday with his mother. He hurried back to his flat in Montparnasse, but at first he refused to involve himself in a war which, as he insisted, was of no concern to a neutral Irishman like himself. Once the Germans occupied Paris in 1940, however, his attitude of unconcern did not continue for long. He felt soon very annoyed with the Nazi treatment of the Jews among whom he had many close friends. His anger led to action. By the end of 1940 he was actively involved with a Resistance group with agents all over France gathering details of the movements of German troops. In August 1942, the group was betrayed, and out of 80 members, fewer than 20 survived. Beckett and his wife Suzanne were alerted and got away barely half an hour before the Gestapo came then and there, or sent to be tortured in a concentration camp. For the next four months they were on the run, making through enemy territory, liable at any moment to be recognized, but they were able to cross into unoccupied France, reaching a high hill, the German collapse, Beckett working as a farm labourer remained in semi-hiding, in the mountains behind Avignon.

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## 6.3 The Principal Works of Samuel Beckett:

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NOVELS: 1. *Murphy* 2. *Watt* 3. *The trilogy comprising Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable.*

PLAYS: 1. *Waiting for Godot* 2. *Endgame* 3. *Krapp's Last Tape* 4. *Happy Days* 5. *Play* 6. *Breath* 7. *Not I*

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## 6.4 Waiting for Godot – Introduction:

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*Waiting for Godot* was first produced in Paris in 1952 and it has been translated into eighteen languages and performed all over the world. The play can be stated in a single sentence as “Nothing happens twice”. Practically nothing happens, no development. Neither there is a beginning nor an end. The entire action boils down to this. On a country road, near a tree, two tramps—Estragon and Vladimir—idle away their time waiting for Godot, who never comes. Two strangers, Pozzo a cruel master and Lucky, his half-crazy slave, cross their path, and soon depart. At the end of the Act I, a messenger from Godot arrives and says that he will come tomorrow. In Act II, the waiting continues; the two pass by once more, but the master is now blind and the slave is dumb. The master and slave stumble and fall and are helped on their way by the tramps. The

messenger appears again with the same promise, namely that Godot will come on the following day. Everything remains as it was in the beginning. There is no female character in the play. The spectator or the reader is fascinated by the strangeness of what he witnesses, hoping for a turn in the situation or a solution, which never comes. Beckett denies satisfaction to his audience. He wants the audience to suffer extreme despair.

The immediate appeal of *Waiting for Godot* is due to the fact that, even though nothing much happens, it is intensely theatrical. The endless cross-talk act of the two tramps is always funny and at the same time sad—funny because good cross-talk acts are very funny, and sad because their main reason for talking at all is just to pass the time, to fill in the void. Under the farcical ripple of the dialogue lies a serious concern. The genuine concern of one tramp with the possibility of salvation is constantly broken into by the other with remarks like "I find this most extraordinarily interesting," and the discussion follows a carefully constructed comic pattern, with Vladimir's logic steadily tightening only to be punctured by Estragon's final "People are bloody ignorant apes." This tug between subject-matter and form runs through the whole play. Much of the surface is taken up with farcical satire of conventional social behaviour. Pozzo, for example, is unable to take a simple action like sitting down without an attendant stuff of ceremony; and the two tramps are always trying to strike up what will pass for a polite conversation, using catch-phrases like Vladimir's "This is not boring you, I hope?" But the satire is not mere incidental comedy. The emphasis on the surface aspects of life has its part in the meaning of the play. At one point, fat Pozzo is lying on the ground, unable to get up. Spasmodically he shouts "Help"! Vladimir, glad of this chance to be useful for once, says: "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse- and launches into a long speech which is a typical Beckett scene. The situation itself is farcical and yet has serious implications; and Vladimir's speech, though mock-pompous in tone, contains the real meaning of the play. He says: "What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come." (Page 80) and later he says, "All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which—how shall I say—which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering." (Page 80) The surface "proceedings" of life, of which the play is made up, keep mankind's attention off the despair beneath it all. For Beckett it is a relief because he does not have an optimistic Christian faith in a redemption beyond the despair. *Waiting for Godot* was one of the very best plays. Its two tramps, with their boredom, their fear of pain, their shreds of love and hate, are a surprisingly effective version of the whole human condition—a condition for which action is no answer, chiefly because there is no obvious action to be taken, 'nothing to be done'.

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## 6.5 The Summary of *Waiting for Godot*:

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### Act I

One evening, on a lonely country road near a tree, two elderly men—half-tramp, half-clown—are waiting for someone named Godot who, they hope, will do something for them. The two men, Estragon (“Gogo”) and Vladimir (“Didi”) are not sure what exactly Godot will do for them, any more than they know for certain whether they have come to the right place on the appointed day. They occupy the time as best they can until the arrival there of Pozzo, a local landowner, on his way to the fair to sell his slave, Lucky. Pozzo halts a while with Estragon and Vladimir, eats a meal in there. Pozzo grants them the bones which his slave rejects, and then in gratitude for their society makes Lucky dance and next think aloud for their entertainment. The three become so agitated by Lucky's performance that they all set upon him and silence him. Soon Pozzo moves on with Lucky. Estragon and Vladimir have not been many moments together before a small boy appears with the news that Mr. Godot “won't come this evening but surely tomorrow”. The boy departs; night falls, abruptly; and after briefly contemplating suicide by hanging themselves from the tree, the two men decide to leave but, despite their decision to go, do not move as the curtain falls. The play opens with two men, Vladimir and Estragon, meeting by a leafless tree, whose species is later speculated to be that of willow. Estragon notifies Vladimir of his most recent troubles: he spent the previous night lying in a ditch and received a beating from a number of anonymous assailants. The duo discuss a variety of issues, none of any apparent severe consequence, and it is revealed that they are awaiting a man named Godot. They are not certain if they have ever met Godot, nor if he will even arrive.

Pozzo and his slave, Lucky, subsequently arrive and pause in their journey. Pozzo tries to engage both men in conversation. Lucky is bound by a rope held by Pozzo, who forces Lucky to carry his heavy bags and physically punishes him if he deems his movements too lethargic. Pozzo states that he is on the way to the market, at which he intends to sell Lucky for profit. Following Pozzo's command: “Think!” Lucky performs a dance and a sudden monologue: a torrent of academic-sounding phrases mixed with sounds such as “quaquaquaqua” (Close to the original French for “crap-crap...”). Lucky's speech, in a cryptic manner, seems to reference the underlying themes of the play. Pozzo and Lucky soon depart, leaving Estragon and Vladimir to continue their wait for the elusive Godot.

Soon a boy shows up and explains to Vladimir and Estragon that he is a messenger from Godot, and that Godot will not be arriving tonight, but tomorrow. Vladimir asks about Godot, and the boy exits. Vladimir and Estragon decide that they will also leave, but they remain onstage as the curtain falls.

## Act II

It is the following day. Vladimir and Estragon are again waiting near the tree, which has grown a number of leaves since it was last seen in Act 1; an indication that time has passed since the events contained within Act 1. Both men are still awaiting Godot. Lucky and Pozzo eventually reappear, but not as they were. Pozzo has become blind and Lucky has become mute. Pozzo cannot recall ever having met Vladimir and Estragon. Lucky and Pozzo exit shortly after their spirited encounter, leaving Vladimir and Estragon to go on waiting.

Soon after, the boy reappears to report that Godot will not be coming. The boy states that he has not met Vladimir and Estragon before and he is not the boy who talked to Vladimir yesterday, which causes Vladimir a great deal more frustration than he exhibited during their encounter in Act 1. Vladimir implores the boy to remember him the next day so as to avoid a similar encounter. The boy exits. Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide, but they do not have a rope. They decide to leave and return the day after with a rope, but again they remain as the curtain falls on the final act.

The curtain rises on a scene identical except for the fact that the tree has put forth a few leaves. Estragon joins Vladimir and much the same things happen, except that when Pozzo and Lucky appear. Now Pozzo happens to have gone blind and Lucky dumb. All four collapse on top of one another and then somehow manage to get up again. Pozzo becomes exasperated at Vladimir's questions about time, saying furiously that life itself is only a brief instant. Pozzo leaves, driving Lucky before him, from the side he had entered in Act I. After another brief interval the boy comes again and delivers the same message as before. The sun sets; the moon rises abruptly; the two men again contemplate suicide; and then, despite their agreement to leave, make no movement as the curtain falls.

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### 6.6 Characters:

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Beckett refrained from elaborating on the characters beyond what he had written in the play. He once recalled that when Sir Ralph Richardson "wanted the low-down on Pozzo, his home address and curriculum vitae, and seemed to make the forthcoming of this and similar information the condition of his condescending to illustrate the part of Vladimir ... I told him that all I knew about Pozzo was in the text, that if I had known more I would have put it in the text, and that was true also of the other characters."

#### Vladimir and Estragon:

When Beckett started writing he did not have a visual image of Vladimir and Estragon. They are never referred to as tramps in the text, though are often performed in tramps' costumes on stage. Roger Blin advises: "Beckett heard their voices, but he couldn't describe his characters to me. 'The only thing I'm sure of is that they're wearing bowlers. The bowler hat was of course de rigueur for men in many social contexts when Beckett



was growing up in Foxrock, and [his father] commonly wore one." That said, the play does indicate that the clothes worn at least by Estragon are shabby. When told by Vladimir that he should have been a poet, Estragon says he was, gestures to his rags, and asks if it were not obvious.

There are no physical descriptions of either of the two characters; however, the text indicates that Vladimir is a heavier of the pair: the contemplation-of-suicide scene tells us exactly that. The bowlers and other broadly comic aspects of their personae have reminded modern audiences of Laurel and Hardy, who occasionally played tramps in their films. "The hat-passing game in *Waiting for Godot* and Lucky's inability to think without his hat on are two obvious Beckett derivations from Laurel and Hardy – a substitution of form for essence, covering for reality", wrote Gerald Mast in *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*. Their "blather", which includes Hiberno-English idioms, indicated that they are both Irish.

Vladimir stands through most of the play whereas Estragon sits down numerous times and even dozes off. "Estragon is inert and Vladimir restless." Vladimir looks at the sky and muses on religious or philosophical matters. Estragon "belongs to the stone", preoccupied with mundane things such as what he can get to eat and how to ease his physical aches and pains; he is direct, intuitive. The monotonous, ritualistic means by which Estragon continuously sits upon the stone may be likened to the constant nail filing carried out by Winnie in *Happy Days*, another of Beckett's plays, both actions representing the slow, deliberate erosion of the characters' lives. He finds it hard to remember but can recall certain things when prompted, e.g., when Vladimir asks: "Do you remember the Gospels?" Estragon tells Vladimir about the coloured maps of the Holy Land and that he planned to honeymoon by the Dead Sea; it is his short-term memory that is poorest and points to the fact that he may, in fact, be suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Al Alvarez writes: "But perhaps Estragon's forgetfulness is the cement binding their relationship together. He continually forgets, Vladimir continually reminds him; between them they pass the time." Estragon's forgetfulness affords the author a certain narrative utility also, allowing for the mundane, empty conversations held between him and Vladimir to continue seamlessly.[original research?] They have been together for fifty years but when asked by Pozzo they do not reveal their actual ages. Vladimir's life is not without its discomforts too but he is more resilient of the pair. "Vladimir's pain is primarily mental anguish, which would thus account for his voluntary exchange of his hat for Lucky's, thus signifying Vladimir's symbolic desire for another person's thoughts." These characterizations, for some, represented the act of thinking or mental state (Vladimir) and physical things or the body (Estragon). This is visually depicted by Vladimir's continuous attention to his hat and Estragon to his boots. While the two characters are temperamentally opposite, with their differing responses to a situation, they are both essential as demonstrated in the way Vladimir's metaphysical musings were balanced by Estragon's physical demands.



This description concerns their existential situation, are also demonstrated in one of the play's recurring themes, which is sleep. There are two instances when Estragon falls asleep in the play and has nightmares, about which he wanted to tell Vladimir when he woke. The latter refuses to hear it since he could not tolerate the sense of entrapment experienced by the dreamer during each episode. This idea of entrapment supports the view that the setting of the play may be understood more clearly as dream-like landscape, or, a form of Purgatory, from which neither man can escape. One interpretation noted the link between the two characters' experiences and the way they represent them: the impotence in Estragon's nightmare and Vladimir's predicament of waiting as his companion sleeps. It is also said that sleep and impatience allow the spectators to distinguish between the two main characters, that sleep expresses Estragon's focus on his sensations while Vladimir's restlessness shows his focus on his thoughts. This particular aspect involving sleep is indicative of what some called a pattern of duality in the play. In the case of the protagonists, the duality involves the body and the mind, making the characters complementary.

Throughout the play the couple refer to each other by the pet names "Didi" and "Gogo", although the boy addresses Vladimir as "Mister Albert". Beckett originally intended to call Estragon "Lévy" but when Pozzo questions him he gives his name as "Magrégor, André" and also responds to "Catulle" in French or "Catullus" in the first Faber edition. This became "Adam" in the American edition. Beckett's only explanation was that he was "fed up with Catullus".

Vivian Mercier described *Waiting for Godot* as a play which "has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice." Mercier once questioned Beckett on the language used by the pair: "It seemed to me...he made Didi and Gogo sound as if they had earned PhDs. 'How do you know they hadn't?' was his reply." They clearly have known better times, such as a visit to the Eiffel Tower and grape-harvesting by the Rhône; this is about all either has to say about their pasts, save for Estragon's claim to have been a poet, an explanation Estragon provides to Vladimir for his destitution. In the first stage production, which Beckett oversaw, both are "more shabby-genteel than ragged...Vladimir at least is capable of being scandalised...on a matter of etiquette when Estragon begs for chicken bones or money."

### **Pozzo and Lucky:**

Jean Martin, who originated the role of Lucky in Paris in 1953, spoke to a doctor named Marthe Gautier, who was working at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital. Martin asked if she knew of a physiological reason that would explain Lucky's voice as it was written in the text. Gautier suggested Parkinson's disease, which, she said, "begins with a trembling, which gets more and more noticeable, until later the patient can no longer speak without the voice shaking". Martin began incorporating this idea into his rehearsals. Beckett and the director may not have been completely

convinced, but they expressed no objections. When Martin mentioned to the playwright that he was "playing Lucky as if he were suffering from Parkinson's", Beckett responded by saying "Yes, of course", and mentioning that his own mother had Parkinson's. When Beckett was asked why Lucky was so named, he replied, "I suppose he is lucky to have no more expectations..."

It has been contended that "Pozzo and Lucky are simply Didi and Gogo writ large", unbalanced as their relationship is. However, Pozzo's dominance is noted to be superficial; "upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that Lucky always possessed more influence in the relationship, for he danced, and more importantly, thought – not as a service, but in order to fill a vacant need of Pozzo: he committed all of these acts for Pozzo. As such, since the first appearance of the duo, the true slave had always been Pozzo." Pozzo credits Lucky with having given him all the culture, refinement, and ability to reason that he possesses. His rhetoric has been learned by rote. Pozzo's "party piece" on the sky is a clear example: as his memory crumbles, he finds himself unable to continue under his own steam.

Little is learned about Pozzo besides the fact that he is on his way to the fair to sell his slave, Lucky. He presents himself very much as the Ascendancy landlord, bullying and conceited. His pipe is made by Kapp and Peterson, Dublin's best-known tobacconists (their slogan was "The thinking man's pipe") which he refers to as a "briar" but which Estragon calls a "dudeen" emphasising the differences in their social standing. He confesses to a poor memory but it is more a result of an abiding self-absorption. "Pozzo is a character who has to overcompensate. That's why he overdoes things ... and his overcompensation has to do with a deep insecurity in him. These were things Beckett said, psychological terms he used."

Pozzo controls Lucky by means of an extremely long rope, which he jerks and tugs if Lucky is the least bit slowly. Lucky appears to be the subservient member of their relationship, at least initially, carrying out every task that Pozzo bids him to do without question, portraying a form of "dog-like devotion" to his master. He struggles with a heavy suitcase, falling on a number of occasions, only to be helped and held up by Estragon and Vladimir. Lucky speaks only once in the play and it is in response to Pozzo's order to "think" for Estragon and Vladimir. Pozzo and Lucky have been together for sixty years. The ostensibly abstract philosophical meanderings supplied to the audience by Lucky during his speech has been described as "a flood of completely meaningless gibberish" by Martin Esslin in his essay, "The Theatre of the Absurd". Esslin suggests that this seemingly involuntary, philosophical spouting is an example of the actor's working "against the dialogue rather than with it", providing grounds for Esslin's claims that the "fervor of delivery" in the play, must "stand in a dialectical contrast to the pointlessness of the meaning of the lines". Beckett's advice to the American director Alan Schneider was: "[Pozzo] is a hypomaniac and the only way to play him is to play him mad."

### **The Boy:**

The boy in Act I, a local lad, assures Vladimir that this is the first time he has seen him. He says he was not there the previous day. He confirms he works for Mr. Godot as a goatherd. His brother, whom Godot beats, is a shepherd. Godot feeds both of them and allows them to sleep in his hayloft.

The boy in Act II also assures Vladimir that it was not he who called upon them the day before. He insists that this too is his first visit. When Vladimir asks what Godot does the boy tells him, "He does nothing, sir." [40] We also learn he has a white beard—possibly, the boy is not certain. This boy also has a brother who it seems is sick but there is no clear evidence to suggest that his brother is the boy who came in Act I or the one who came the day before that.

Whether the boy from Act I is the same boy from Act II or not, both boys are polite yet timid. In the first act, the boy, despite arriving while Pozzo and Lucky are still about, does not announce himself until after Pozzo and Lucky leave, saying to Vladimir and Estragon that he waited for the other two to leave out of fear of the two men and of Pozzo's whip; the boy does not arrive early enough in Act II to see either Lucky or Pozzo. In both acts, the boy seems hesitant to speak very much, saying mostly "Yes Sir" or "No Sir", and winds up exiting by running away.

### **Godot:**

The identity of Godot has been the subject of much debate. "When Colin Duckworth asked Beckett point-blank whether Pozzo was Godot, the author replied: 'No. It is just implied in the text, but it's not true.'"

Deirdre Bair says that though "Beckett will never discuss the implications of the title", she suggests two stories that both may have at least partially inspired it. The first is that because feet are a recurring theme in the play, Beckett has said the title was suggested to him by the slang French term for boot: "godillot, godasse". The second story, according to Bair, is that Beckett once encountered a group of spectators at the French Tour de France bicycle race, who told him "Nous attendons Godot" – they were waiting for a competitor whose name was Godot.

"Beckett said to Peter Woodthorpe that he regretted calling the absent character 'Godot', because of all the theories involving God to which this had given rise." "I also told [Ralph] Richardson that if by Godot I had meant God I would [have] said God, and not Godot. This seemed to disappoint him greatly." That said, Beckett did once concede, "It would be fatuous of me to pretend that I am not aware of the meanings attached to the word 'Godot', and the opinion of many that it means 'God'. But you must remember – I wrote the play in French, and if I did have that meaning in my mind, it was somewhere in my unconscious and I was not overtly aware of it." However, Beckett has often stressed the strong unconscious impulses that partly control his writing; he has even spoken of being 'in a trance' when he writes. While Beckett stated he originally

had no knowledge of Balzac's play *Mercadetou le faiseur*, whose character Godeau has an identical-sounding name and is involved in a similar situation, it has been suggested he may have been instead influenced by *The Lovable Cheat*, a minor adaptation of *Mercadet* starring Buster Keaton, whose works Beckett had admired, and whom he later sought out for film.

Of the two boys who work for Godot only one appears safe from beatings, "Beckett said, only half-jokingly, that one of Estragon's feet was saved".

The name "Godot" is pronounced in Britain and Ireland with the emphasis on the first syllable, /'gɒdɒʊ/ GOD-oh; in North America it is usually pronounced with an emphasis on the second syllable, /gə'doʊ/ gə-DOH. Beckett himself said the emphasis should be on the first syllable, and that the North American pronunciation is a mistake. Georges Borchardt, Beckett's literary agent, and who represents Beckett's literary estate, has always pronounced "Godot" in the French manner, with equal emphasis on both syllables. Borchardt checked with Beckett's nephew, Edward, who told him his uncle pronounced it that way as well. The 1956 Broadway production split the difference by having Vladimir pronounce "Godot" with equal stress on both syllables (goh-doh) and Estragon pronounce it with the accent on the second syllable (g'doh).

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## 6.6 Questions:

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1. What is the significance of the title of the play *Waiting for Godot*?
2. What is the significance of the tree in "*Waiting for Godot*"?
3. Explain Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, as tragicomedy.
4. Discuss waiting in *Waiting for Godot*. What does waiting mean to the characters. What does it mean to us?
5. Discuss the characteristics of Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. Discuss broadly the different kind of characteristics...
6. If *Waiting for Godot* is moralistic in nature, what is the moral? How does the play instruct us to lead our lives? Are these lessons subjective and personal for each viewer, or objective and universal?
7. Examine identity of Godot in *Waiting for Godot*.
8. What do Vladimir and Estragon represent?
9. *Waiting for Godot* is a play where 'nothing happens twice.' Explain.
10. What is the significance of the confusion about Pozzo's name and identity in *Waiting for Godot*?
11. Analyse the extent to which Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is influenced by existential philosophy.
12. Compare and contrast the relationships in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* between Estragon and Vladimir on the one hand and Pozzo and Lucky on the other. What do these relationships say about alienation and mutual dependence? And about freedom and slavery?

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# STUDY OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT PART II

## Unit Structure

### 7.0 Objectives

#### 7.1 Setting

#### 7.2 Interpretations

#### 7.3 *Waiting for Godot* as an Absurd Play

#### 7.4 Symbolism and Approaches to *Waiting for Godot*

#### 7.5 Questions

#### 7.6 References

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### 7.0 Objectives:

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- To study the life and works of renowned absurd playwright Samuel Beckett
  - To study the impact of the play *Waiting for Godot* on modern theatre
  - To study the themes and elements of absurd drama in the play
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### 7.1 Setting:

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There is only one scene throughout both acts. Two men are waiting on a country road by a tree. The men are of unspecified origin, though it is clear that they are not English by nationality since they refer to currency as francs, and tell derisive jokes about the English – and in English-language productions the pair are traditionally played with Irish accents. The script calls for Estragon to sit on a low mound but in practice—as in Beckett's own 1975 German production—this is usually a stone. In the first act the tree is bare. In the second, a few leaves have appeared despite the script specifying that it is the next day. The minimal description calls to mind "the idea of the lieu vague, a location which should not be particularised".

Other clues about the location can be found in the dialogue. In Act I, Vladimir turns toward the auditorium and describes it as a bog. In Act II, Vladimir again motions to the auditorium and notes that there is "Not a soul in sight." When Estragon rushes toward the back of the stage in Act II, Vladimir scolds him, saying that "There's no way out there." Also in Act II, Vladimir comments that their surroundings look nothing like the Macon country, and Estragon states that he's lived his whole life "Here! In the Cackon country!"



Alan Schneider once suggested putting the play on in the round—Pozzo has been described as a ringmaster—but Beckett dissuaded him: "I don't in my ignorance agree with the round and feel Godot needs a very closed box." He even contemplated at one point having a "faint shadow of bars on stage floor" but, in the end, decided against this level of what he called "explicitation". In Beckett's 1975 Schiller Theater production in Berlin, there are times when Didi and Gogo appear to bounce off something "like birds trapped in the strands of [an invisible] net", in James Knowlson's description.

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## 7.2 Interpretations:

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"Because the play is so stripped down, so elemental, it invites all kinds of social and political and religious interpretation", wrote Normand Berlin in a tribute to the play in Autumn 1999, "with Beckett himself placed in different schools of thought, different movements and "isms". The attempts to pin him down have not been successful, but the desire to do so is natural when we encounter a writer whose minimalist art reaches for bedrock reality. "Less" forces us to look for "more", and the need to talk about Godot and about Beckett has resulted in a steady outpouring of books and articles.

Throughout *Waiting for Godot*, the audience may encounter religious, philosophical, classical, psychoanalytical and biographical – especially wartime – references. There are ritualistic aspects and elements taken directly from vaudeville, and there is a danger in making more of these than what they are: that is, merely structural conveniences, avatars into which the writer places his fictional characters. The play "exploits several archetypal forms and situations, all of which lend themselves to both comedy and pathos." Beckett makes this point emphatically clear in the opening notes to Film: "No truth value attaches to the above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience." He made another important remark to Lawrence Harvey, saying that his "work does not depend on experience – [it is] not a record of experience. Of course you use it."

Beckett directed the play for the Schiller-Theater in Berlin in 1975. Although he had overseen many productions, this was the first time that he had taken complete control. Walter Asmus was his conscientious young assistant director. The production was not naturalistic. Beckett explained,

Over the years, Beckett clearly realised that the greater part of Godot's success came down to the fact that it was open to a variety of readings and that this was not necessarily a bad thing. Beckett himself sanctioned "one of the most famous mixed-race productions of Godot, performed at the Baxter Theatre in the University of Cape Town, directed by Donald Howarth, with [...] two black actors, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, playing Didi and Gogo; Pozzo, dressed in checked shirt and gumboots reminiscent of an Afrikaner landlord, and Lucky ('a shanty town piece of white trash'[67]) were played by two white actors, Bill Flynn and Peter Piccolo [...]. The Baxter production has often been portrayed as if it were

an explicitly political production, when in fact it received very little emphasis. What such a reaction showed, however, was that, although the play can in no way be taken as a political allegory, there are elements that are relevant to any local situation in which one man is being exploited or oppressed by another.

Waiting for Godot Beckett often focused on the idea of "the suffering of being." Most of the play deals with the fact that Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for something to alleviate their boredom. Godot can be understood as one of the many things in life that people wait for. The play has often been viewed as fundamentally existentialist in its take on life. The fact that none of the characters retain a clear mental history means that they are constantly struggling to prove their existence. Thus, the boy who consistently fails to remember either of the two protagonists casts doubt on their very existence. This is why Vladimir demands to know that the boy will in fact remember them the next day. Waiting for Godot is part of the Theater of the Absurd. This implies that it is meant to be irrational. Absurd theater does away with the concepts of drama, chronological plot, logical language, themes, and recognizable settings. There is also a split between the intellect and the body within the work. Thus, Vladimir represents the intellect and Estragon the body, both of whom Existentialism which carries different themes and meanings is a twentieth century philosophical movement that began and flourished after World War II in France. The first existentialists with whom this philosophical movement can be related are Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. They were not existing when the actual existentialism started in the twentieth century. Though existentialism got different connotations but basically its focus was on individual and his relation to God that why people exist and what role this existence has got. It says that man's life is full of unease, restlessness, awkwardness, apprehensions, worries, angst, and fear and with no meaning in life. In this regard Marshall while presenting all the negative aspects of life states that it is concerned with homelessness, facelessness, meaninglessness and solitariness. There are two views about existentialism i.e., atheist and theist existentialism. Atheist existentialism is the belief that life is meaningless with no purpose. It is just existence with no ultimate truth. This view is shared by Camus and Samuel Beckett etc. On the other hand, theist existentialism believes that it is not the fact that life is without any purpose and meaningless but it is we people that cannot understand this phenomenon. This includes Kierkegaard's philosophy about existence who turns to Christ for salvation. To make this meaningless life more dignified and decorous, choices are to be made. This does not mean that these choices are meaningless. These choices are supposed to be rational and not irrational like the world, man lives in with no purpose. In this regard Nietzsche says "God is dead and men are faced with the profound responsibility of deciding for themselves, choosing for themselves, acting for themselves, and being themselves; i.e., choosing authentic existences rather than "losing" themselves in the crowd, being coming a "non-entity," escaping reality". It means that they are of the view that do, what you want cannot exist without the other. Here, in this study it's decided to work on the absurdity in this text in order to analyze

that how this text represent key issues of absurdity. The text selected is Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Though much have been written on this literary text from existentialist point of view but the present study has uncovered many dilemmas of absurdity in the text and in this way the analysis will further our understanding of absurdity. Although efforts have been made to make the analysis more comprehensive, but still because of the length of the texts only limited examples are selected and thus worked on to because after death only your existence will come to an end and there will be no future about which you are to be worried. There is another name Jean-Paul Sartre whose famous maxim is "existence precedes essence". William Barrent says that "essence is what the thing is; existence refers rather to the sheer fact that the thing is". He further clarifies it and says that if somebody says that I am a man then it means that "I am" represents existence and "man" is the essence that the presence creates. It means that we exist with no essence and thus no reason or purpose. Man does not exist for the fulfillment of some predefined goals but rather it is man himself who will define his goal and essence. In this way individual is free to live and act. In this sense these views reject any agreed upon or determining code. But it should be kept in mind that this freedom does not avoid man's responsibility. This is this freedom which leads towards responsibility. The individual is responsible for what he is doing, he is and what he thinks. As there is no limit to man's freedom, in the same way there is no rational bound to what he is responsible for. It is man who can choose his own course of action but this freedom is also a problem. Now what happens is that if individuals are free and they are completely responsible for their actions, beliefs and other things then this struggle between freedom and responsibility creates a situation of anxiety which leads to escapism and at last to self-deception. To conclude, existentialism is a movement whose basic themes include individual freedom, responsibility, irrationality of life, subjectivity, selection of choices, anxiety and absurdity.

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### 7.3 *Waiting for Godot* as an Absurd Play:

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The play is divided into two acts. In Act I, two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon; or "Didi" and "Gogo", are waiting on a country road for a mysterious Godot, who eventually sends a boy to inform them he is not coming but will surely come the following day. The tramps think about separation and even suicide in each act, yet remain dependent on each other and never do anything. The other two characters, Pozzo and Lucky, who are physically linked to each other by a rope, make continuous purposeless journeys to fill their existence. The play ends with the two tramps still waiting for Godot, who never comes.

#### **Absurdity in Title**

According to "Lexikonder Weltliteratur", the title of the play already includes past history, action and solution, sense and meaninglessness, goal and unsatisfiability. (cf. Von Wilpert 1431) In general, a title evokes expectations and is foreshadowing the coming scene. When there is a

name mentioned in the title, we automatically assume that this name stands for the most important character in the text. But with regard to *Waiting for Godot* one can learn that “waiting” appears – but Godot never does. Thus, it is an unconventional handling of the title through which a disillusion is created. In short, one could say that the title is misleading you.

### **Absurdity in Setting**

*Waiting for Godot's* background is "Country Road" wood evening. "The introduction itself is a wonderful glimpse of the reader through the absurd scripts that it has experienced. This absurd exists in every aspect of this drama. The reader is easily confused with the same strange funny thing as the character. The habit has been reflected in drama, characterization, plot structure and stylistic theme. The reader cannot remove this habit, the play is also provided by monotonous repetition, repelling, but to a deeper understanding of people.

### **Absurdity in Structure**

The play *Waiting for Godot* is structured in a way, which presents the idea not only about the uselessness and meaninglessness of time but also of life. The basic structure of the drama where being tired of their lives and waiting but without any help from Godot, the two main characters with non-sensible existence, two times both in Act one and Act two, try to commit suicides. The continuous waiting increases their despair and their lives are disgusted in this way and thus absurd. This is this structure, which shows the absurd nature of this play. So, it could be said that death, which is fear, and the end of life, time and hope is the overwhelming theme in this text. We know that death is the worst happening and nobody will want it to have but still if someone looks to the protagonists of the concerned text that are Estragon and Vladimir in this work of art, they not only want death but also welcome it. They want death to escape the harsh realities of life and to achieve their goals and this is the sign of absurdity.

### **Absurdity in Theme**

Samuel Beckett's *Godot* *Waiting for the alienation and truth, the purpose, the alienation theme of God and mutual theme "Waiting for Godot" is Samuel Beckett's play. Play and sparring Periodic performance conveys hopeless feelings, feelings influence this senseless world, not fearing God. Due to lack of communication, alienation of humans, absurd vocabulary, image, structure and perspectives are sufficient to demonstrate. The aim of the play is to evoke imperfections and frustration.*

### **Absurdity in Characters**

The characters of the texts also got elements of absurdity. In order to prove it, if we consider the main characters of “*Waiting for Godot*” i.e., Estragon and Vladimir, we can see that they are waiting without knowing the purpose they are waiting for.

Furthermore, they are not making sense of the lives and existence and that is why they think about suicide. In the same way, they also indicate the carelessness of Godot towards them. This relationship is represented in the shape of master slave dichotomy named Pozzo, the master and Lucky, the slave, where no importance is given to the slave and is overburdened without any care. This is to make Estragon and Vladimir realize that though you are waiting for Godot but this could be your situation in the end. Another thing which is also associated with the absurdity in the characters of “Waiting for Godot” is their trust on each other for holding up and support. Each of them believes to get some sort of help from the other one and thus tries to put a seal to his chaotic life. Therefore, we can say that it is this meaninglessness, this detachment, this strangeness and finally, this spiritual and physical isolation in the characters of the text that make them absurd characters.

### **Absurdity in Actions/Dialogues**

In play the very first page and infact the very first dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir has absurdity and purposelessness of life. Estragon while pulling off his shoes, panting and quite exhausted rests for some time when Vladimir enters. Estragon says;

ESTRAGON: (giving up again). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR: (advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart). I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.) So, there you are again. (p- 1)

This dialogue brings into surface the absurd nature of the play where though Estragon is discussing his problem of taking off his shoes but it represents the entire human existence where man is disappointed and disillusioned by the very fact of existence which bring despair and hence, absurdity. It means that man cannot change his situation. What simply he can do is to exist and suffer. This “nothing to be done” is repeated four times in this play (pp.1,3,4&15). It stresses the helpless nature of man. The word “again” in the above extract refers to repetition which makes the life monotonous and boring. Similarly, Vladimir’s state of action is also symbolic in nature as he gets inflicted with prostrate disease due to which he is moving with legs wide apart and with stiff strides. It represents man’s suffering in this universe where life is nothing but absurd. In another place, the despair in life is discussed as;

VLADIMIR: (gloomily). It's too much for one man. (Pause. Cheerfully.) On the other hand, what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties. (p-2)

Vladimir is fed up of the routine miseries of life and that is why he says “it is too much for one man”. He means to say that life is a sort of burden where living has got no incentives and no purpose and hence, quite absurd. Vladimir’s actions too are absurd. He starts gloomily and after a pause

becomes cheerful when he says that it is no use of crying over spilt milk. It means that the time has gone when he should have thought about these troubles.

Now, he has lost all that he had. His life is completely absurd. The two characters of the play are in fact inviting death. They cannot bear this absurd life anymore where there is no clarity of purpose and goal. They invite each other to kill each other so that they can escape this absurdity of life. This fact is clear from the following dialogue;

VLADIMIR: You always say that, and you always come crawling back.

ESTRAGON: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

VLADIMIR: What other? (Pause.) What other?

ESTRAGON: Like billions of others.

VLADIMIR: (Sententious.) To every man his little cross. (He sighs.) Till he dies. (Afterthought.) And is forgotten. (57)

They even want recognition but are not welcomed. Absurdity cannot exceed further than the fact that your very name becomes senseless as what happened with Pozzo.

POZZO: (Terrifying voice.) I am Pozzo! (Silence.) Pozzo! (Silence.) Does that name mean nothing to you? (Silence) say does that name mean nothing to you? (Vladimir and Estragon look at each other questioningly.) (p.23)

Here Pozzo asks time and again that his name is Pozzo but then too Estragon and Vladimir are indifferent and call him with wrong name. If somebody loses his identity and name, the situation becomes unbearable and absurd. This gives the sense that like Pozzo, everybody will lose his or her identity in this chaotic world where people become so indifferent that they cannot even recognize you by your name. Absurdity is not only in the meaninglessness of the world we live in but also in the time when we become blind to it and cannot realize its effects or functions.

When Vladimir asked Pozzo about his blindness he told:

POZZO: I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune. [Pause.] Sometimes I wonder if I'm not still asleep.

VLADIMIR: And when was that? POZZO: I don't know.

VLADIMIR: But no later than yesterday-

POZZO:(violently). Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too. (p.85)

Here the important point is that of meaning. Symbolically, this means that we all are blind without the notion of time. In fact, this is the situation of all human beings. The meaninglessness of time is in fact the meaninglessness of life and this meaninglessness cannot be changed if one makes efforts as Vladimir says that "one is what one is... the essentials doesn't change (p.15). It means that the absurdity of the world is not to be changed but it is you who is supposed to undergo change and that is death.



Habit, boredom, monotony, ignorance and impotence which enveloped the world after the wars and created an absurd existence, is recreated by Beckett in "Waiting for Godot" Beckett captured this situation and depicted it through the deadening condition of the two tramps in a null and void state without any real action. The play has often been interpreted as a parable where Godot stands as God, or for a mythical human being or for the meaning of life, death or something eventful.

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#### **7.4 Symbolism and Approaches to *Waiting for Godot*:**

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##### **Freudian:**

"Bernard Dukore develops a triadic theory in Didi, Gogo and the absent Godot, based on Sigmund Freud's trinitarian description of the psyche in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and the usage of onomastic techniques. Dukore defines the characters by what they lack: the rational Go-go embodies the incomplete ego, the missing pleasure principle: (e)go-(e)go. Di-di (id-id) – who is more instinctual and irrational – is seen as the backward id or subversion of the rational principle. Godot fulfills the function of the superego or moral standards. Pozzo and Lucky are just re-iterations of the main protagonists. Dukore finally sees Beckett's play as a metaphor for the futility of man's existence when salvation is expected from an external entity, and the self is denied introspection."

##### **Jungian:**

"The four archetypal personalities or the four aspects of the soul are grouped in two pairs: the ego and the shadow, the persona and the soul's image (animus or anima). The shadow is the container of all our despised emotions repressed by the ego. Lucky, the shadow, serves as the polar opposite of the egocentric Pozzo, prototype of prosperous mediocrity, who incessantly controls and persecutes his subordinate, thus symbolising the oppression of the unconscious shadow by the despotic ego. Lucky's monologue in Act I appears as a manifestation of a stream of repressed unconsciousness, as he is allowed to "think" for his master. Estragon's name has another connotation, besides that of the aromatic herb, tarragon: "estragon" is a cognate of estrogen, the female hormone (Carter, 130). This prompts us to identify him with the anima, the feminine image of Vladimir's soul. It explains Estragon's propensity for poetry, his sensitivity and dreams, his irrational moods. Vladimir appears as the complementary masculine principle, or perhaps the rational persona of the contemplative type."

##### **Philosophical and Existential:**

Broadly speaking, existentialists hold that there are certain fundamental questions that all human beings must come to terms with if they are to take their subjective existences seriously and with intrinsic value. Questions such as life, death, the meaning of human existence and the place of God in that existence are among them. By and large, the theories of existentialism assert that conscious reality is very complex and without an

"objective" or universally known value: the individual must create value by affirming it and living it, not by simply talking about it or philosophising it in the mind. The play may be seen to touch on all of these issues.

Martin Esslin, in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1960), argued that *Waiting for Godot* was part of a broader literary movement that he called the Theatre of the Absurd, a form of theatre that stemmed from the absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus. Absurdism itself is a branch of the traditional assertions of existentialism, pioneered by Søren Kierkegaard, and posits that, while inherent meaning might very well exist in the universe, human beings are incapable of finding it due to some form of mental or philosophical limitation. Thus, humanity is doomed to be faced with the Absurd, or the absolute absurdity of the existence in lack of intrinsic purpose.

### **Ethical:**

Just after Didi and Gogo have been particularly selfish and callous, the boy comes to say that Godot is not coming. The boy (or pair of boys) may be seen to represent meekness and hope before compassion is consciously excluded by an evolving personality and character, and in which case may be the youthful Pozzo and Lucky. Thus Godot is compassion and fails to arrive every day, as he says he will. No-one is concerned that a boy is beaten. In this interpretation, there is the irony that only by changing their hearts to be compassionate can the characters fixed to the tree move on and cease to have to wait for Godot.

### **Christian:**

Much of the play is steeped in scriptural allusion. The boy from Act I mentions that he and his brother mind Godot's sheep and goats. Much can be read into Beckett's inclusion of the story of the two thieves from Luke 23:39–43 and the ensuing discussion of repentance. It is easy to see the solitary tree as representative of the Christian cross or the tree of life. Some see God and Godot as one and the same. Vladimir's "Christ have mercy upon us!" could be taken as evidence that that is at least what he believes.

Another, perhaps less conspicuous, potentially religious, element in the play, is Pozzo's bout with blindness, during which he comes to resemble the biblical figure of Bartimaeus', or, 'The Blind Beggar'.

This reading is given further weight early in the first act when Estragon asks Vladimir what it is that he has requested from Godot:

Vladimir: Oh ... nothing very definite.

Estragon: A kind of prayer.

Vladimir: Precisely.

Estragon: A vague supplication.

Vladimir: Exactly.

Other explicit Christian elements that are mentioned in the play include, but are not limited to, repentance, the Gospels, a Saviour, human beings made in God's image, the cross, and Cain and Abel.

According to biographer Anthony Cronin, "[Beckett] always possessed a Bible, at the end more than one edition, and Bible concordances were always among the reference books on his shelves." [85] Beckett himself was quite open on the issue: "Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar so I naturally use it." [86] As Cronin argues, these biblical references "may be ironic or even sarcastic".

"In answer to a defence counsel question in 1937 (during the libel action brought by his uncle against Oliver St. John Gogarty) as to whether he was a Christian, Jew or atheist, Beckett replied, 'None of the three' ". Looking at Beckett's entire œuvre, Mary Bryden observed that "the hypothesised God who emerges from Beckett's texts is one who is both cursed for his perverse absence and cursed for his surveillant presence. He is by turns dismissed, satirised, or ignored, but he, and his tortured son, are never definitively discarded."

### **Autobiographical:**

Waiting for Godot has been described as a "metaphor for the long walk into Roussillon, when Beckett and Suzanne slept in haystacks ... during the day and walked by night ... [or] of the relationship of Beckett to Joyce". Beckett told Ruby Cohn that Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*, which he saw on his journey to Germany in 1936, was a source for the play.

### **Sexual:**

Though the sexuality of Vladimir and Estragon is not always considered by critics, some see the two vagabonds as an ageing homosexual couple, who are worn out, with broken spirits, impotent and not engaging sexually any longer. The two appear to be written as a parody of a married couple. Peter Boxall points out that the play features two characters who seem to have shared life together for years; they quarrel, embrace, and are mutually dependent. Beckett was interviewed at the time the play was premiering in New York, and, speaking of his writings and characters in general, Beckett said "I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past." Vladimir and Estragon's consideration of hanging themselves can be seen as a desperate way to achieve at least one final erection.

Pozzo and his slave, Lucky, arrive on the scene. Pozzo is a stout man, who wields a whip and holds a rope around Lucky's neck. Some critics have considered that the relationship of these two characters is homosexual and sado-masochistic in nature. Lucky's long speech is a torrent of broken ideas and speculations regarding man, sex, God, and time. It has been said that the play contains little or no sexual hope; which is the play's lament, and the source of the play's humour and comedic tenderness. Norman Mailer wonders if Beckett might be restating the sexual and moral basis of Christianity, that life and strength is found in an adoration of those in the lower depths where God is concealed.

## Beckett's objection to the casting of female actors

Beckett was not open to most interpretative approaches to his work. He famously objected when, in the 1980s, several women's acting companies began to stage the play. "Women don't have prostates", said Beckett, a reference to the fact that Vladimir frequently has to leave the stage to urinate.

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### 7.5 Questions:

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1. What are some literary devices used by Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*?
2. Why is *Waiting for Godot*, despite its absurdity, a popular play?
3. What are the symbolic meanings of the characters in *Waiting for Godot*?
4. "The play has no plot, no climax, no denouement, no beginning, no middle, no end"--- elucidate this comment.
5. What are the symbols in *Waiting for Godot*?
6. Comment on the title of *Waiting for Godot*. It's a two-act play written by Samuel Beckett.
7. What is the tone of *Waiting for Godot*?
8. Samuel Beckett described his *Waiting for Godot* as a tragicomedy. To what extent is this an accurate description?
9. Discuss the concept of freedom in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. What does the concept of freedom portrayed in the play tell you about Beckett's understanding of the human condition?
10. Do you consider Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* a statement of hope or hopelessness regarding human existence? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
11. If *Waiting for Godot* is moralistic in nature, what is the moral? How does the play instruct us to lead our lives? Are these lessons subjective and personal for each viewer, or objective and universal?

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### 7.6 References:

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## STUDY OF AMEDEE OR HOW TO GET RID OF IT BY EUGENE IONESCO

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### 8.0 Objectives:

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- To study the play *Amedee* or *How to Get Rid of It* by Eugene Ionesco
- To understand the Theatre of Absurd further through the play
- To examine various themes and techniques of Theatre of Absurd employed in the play

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## 8.1 Introduction to the Playwright:

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Eugène Ionesco, born on November 26, 1909 at Slatina, Romania was a Romanian-born French dramatist. His one-act “antiplay” *La Cantatrice chauve* (1949; *The Bald Soprano*) inspired a revolution in dramatic techniques and helped inaugurate the Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin regarded Ionesco as one among the four defining playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, the other three being Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet.

Ionesco was taken to France as an infant but returned to Romania in 1925. After obtaining a degree in French at the University of Bucharest, he worked for a doctorate in Paris (1939), where, after 1945, he made his home. During these years, he became famous for his public literary debates with his professor of aesthetics, Mihail Dragomirescu.

Ionesco's first publication was a volume of poetry, *Elegii pentru fiinte mici* (*Elegies for Minuscule Creatures*), published in Romania in 1931. Ionesco's first volume of essays, *Nu* (*No*; translated into French as *Non*, 1986), was published in 1934 and sparked debate in Romanian literary circles. Ionesco attacked revered Romanian writers of the time— most prominent among them the novelist Camil Petrescu and the poets Tudor Arghezi and Ion Barbu.

While working as a proofreader, he decided to learn English; and after the age of 40, wrote his first play, *The Bald Soprano*. His best-known works are *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Chairs* (1952) and *Rhinoceros* (1960).

Like Shaw and Brecht, Ionesco also contributed to the theater with his theoretical writings. Ionesco wrote mainly in an attempt to correct critics who he felt misunderstood his work and therefore wrongly influenced his audience. In doing so, Ionesco articulated ways in which he thought contemporary theater should be reformed. *Notes and Counter Notes* is a collection of Ionesco's writings, including musings on why he chose to write for the theater and direct responses to his contemporary critics. Ionesco was made a member of the prestigious *Académie Française* in 1970. He also received numerous awards including Tours Festival Prize for film, 1959; Prix Italia, 1963; Society of Authors Theatre Prize, 1966; Grand Prix National for theatre, 1969; Monaco Grand Prix, 1969; Austrian State Prize for European Literature, 1970; Jerusalem Prize, 1973; and honorary doctorates from New York University and the universities of Leuven, Warwick and Tel Aviv. Eugène Ionesco died at the age of 84 on March 29, 1994, and is buried in the *Cimetière du Montparnasse*, in Paris. Although Ionesco wrote almost entirely in French, he is one of Romania's most honoured artists and he remains among the most important dramatists of the 20th century.

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## 8.2 The Theatre of the Absurd:

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The Theatre of the Absurd is a movement made up of many diverse plays, most of which were written between 1940 and 1960. When first



performed, these plays shocked their audiences as they were startlingly different from anything that had been previously staged. Many of them were labelled as “anti-plays.”

To clarify and define this radical movement, Martin Esslin coined the term “The Theatre of the Absurd” in his 1960 book of the same name. He defined it as such, because all of the plays emphasized the absurdity of the human condition. The word “absurd” is used synonymously with “ridiculous,” Esslin referred to its original meaning - ‘out of harmony with reason or propriety; illogical’.

Absurdist Theatre was heavily influenced by Existential philosophy. It reflected the philosophy in Albert Camus’ essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). In this essay, Camus attempts to present a reasonable answer as to why man should not commit suicide in face of a meaningless, absurd existence. To do so, he uses the Greek mythological figure, Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down. Sisyphus repeats this futile cycle for all of eternity.

The absurd dramatists, however, did not resolve the problem of man’s meaningless existence quite as positively as Camus. In fact, they typically offered no solution to the problem whatsoever, thus suggesting that the question is ultimately unanswerable.

The theatre of the absurd is characterised by the following features:

### **8.2.1 Flat characters**

The characters in the theatre of the absurd are flat characters, types because they have to deal with the absurd universe. Many absurdist form their characters in interdependent pairs, often either two males or a male and a female. Beckett scholars term it as “pseudo couple”. The characters may be outwardly equal or have a begrudging interdependence like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* or Amedee and Madeleine in *Amedee*.

### **8.2.2 Themes**

The theatre of the absurd features a wide variety of subject matter, yet there are certain themes, or ideas, which recur frequently within the movement. These themes were the product of a new attitude that swept post-World War II Europe. It consisted primarily of the acknowledgement that the “certitudes” and “assumptions” of prior generations had “been tested and found wanting, that they [were] discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions” (Esslin). Two themes that recur frequently throughout absurdist dramas are a meaningless world and the isolation of the individual.

The playwrights involved with the Theatre of the Absurd were not conscious of belonging to a movement while writing their plays. Ironically, they each thought of himself as “a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in [his own] private world” (Esslin). This perspective clearly

penetrates their work, as most of the plays emphasize the isolation of the individual, or man's inability to connect with others.

Waiting is another common theme in their plays, the most famous example being Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Amedee too highlights this theme, through Amedee and Madeleine who have lived with the corpse for fifteen years, not making up their minds to get rid of it.

### 8.2.3 Form

Form is a very important aspect of absurdist plays. These playwrights were reacting against realism. They did not want to show life as it really was, but rather, the inner-life of man—what was going on inside his head. Esslin explains that “the Theatre of the Absurd merely communicates one poet's most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation, his own sense of being, his individual vision of the world”. In order to portray this “personal intuition” the playwrights had to abandon conventional methods and adopt a more poetic, or lyrical, form.

### 8.2.4 Devaluation of Language

The absurd dramatists felt that conventional language had failed man—it was an inadequate means of communication. As a result, the movement of the characters on stage often contradicts their words or dialogue. Another common way in which they presented the uselessness of language was by having their characters constantly speak in clichés, or overused, tired expressions.

### 8.2.5 Lack of conventional plot

Absurdist plays lack a plot or a clear beginning and end with a purposeful development in between. There is usually a great deal of repetition in both language and action, which suggests that the play isn't actually “going anywhere.”

The plays go against most of the logical structures of traditional theatre. There is little dramatic action as conventionally understood; however frantically the characters perform, their busyness serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), plot is eliminated, and a timeless, circular quality emerges.

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## 8.3 Plot Summary of *Amedee*:

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### 8.3.1 Act I

The plot opens in a room of a small apartment which combines the functions of a dining-room, drawing-room and office. Amedee, a middle-aged playwright is unsuccessfully attempting to write his play. He comments on the mushrooms growing in the house. A conversation between the concierge and a neighbour is overheard. Amedee calls his wife Madeleine to come out of the bedroom, claiming that she spends too

much time looking at 'him'. Madeleine claims that she was dusting the room and argues that she is reduced to being a slave. Amedee thinks 'he' has grown a little; Madeleine disagrees. The couple argue over Amedee's inability to complete writing his play.

He describes his lack of creative inspiration for the past fifteen years. They discuss how more and more mushrooms are growing every day. They comment on how the mushrooms are spreading and also wonder whether it is normal to have so many mushrooms growing in their apartment.

Amedee mentions that the couple have shut themselves up in their flat for the past fifteen years and have never gone out. Madeleine starts working at the telephone switchboard and Amedee resumes his writing. He seems to be writing the same dialogue that he has been writing for fifteen years.

Amedee enters the bedroom and Madeleine brings him back out. They discuss how 'he' has aged over fifteen years and estimate 'his' age to be around 35. They also mention that 'he' is dead. Madeleine complains about having to cut the corpse's nails, which grow back rapidly. Every time Madeleine works at her switchboard, she puts on a hat and takes it off while talking to Amedee. Between Madeleine answering phone calls, they discuss how the corpse is growing and how his green eyes are open.

The couple argue about who will do the shopping as they are both busy working. Amedee buys food provisions by lowering a basket tied with a rope through the window. Madeleine tells him a list of provisions to be bought, interspersing the items with her telephone conversation.

Over lunch, they once again discuss how the corpse is growing and whether he has forgiven them. The postman is overheard asking where the Buccinioni live. Amedee and Madeleine are terrified as they have not had a visitor for the past fifteen years. They debate and then open the door guiltily. The postman says he has a letter for Amedee Buccinioni. Amedee claims it is not for him as there are hundreds of men who share his name. There is a long conversation with the postman about this.

The postman leaves and the couple find yet another mushroom. Loud cracks and a crashing noise are heard from the bedroom. Amedee says that the corpse's head has grown so much, it has smashed through the window. The couple are worried about the neighbours finding out. To explain themselves and shift the blame, they both shout loudly that it was the postman.

More crashing sounds are heard, and a pair of feet slides into the room from the bedroom door. Madeleine breaks down weeping because the corpse seems to be growing geometrically and she cannot cope with it any longer. She is unable to put on her hat and return to her work at the switchboard.

### 8.3.2 Act II

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The scene opens in the same room but now it has additional furniture from the bedroom, to make more room for the dead man. The feet keep growing and progressing further into the room at sudden intervals. Giant mushrooms are now growing in the room.

Amedee feels helpless. He is exhausted and tonics or medicines don't seem to benefit him. Madeleine threatens to get a divorce if Amedee won't get rid of the corpse. The concierge is overheard talking with a neighbour about how the Buccinioni are strange people. Madeleine nags Amedee to finally do something about the corpse. She compels him not to procrastinate. She wonders whether they ought to have reported the death fifteen years ago when it occurred. Instead, they have been hiding from the world like criminals.

They try to recall but do not remember who the dead man is nor whether Amedee or Madeleine killed him. They discuss whether it was a baby or a young man, an illicit lover that they killed. Madeleine is protective about the mushrooms and complains that Amedee has broken all the plates in the house. The feet grow a few more inches.

The couple state that their life has been nothing but just waiting. Amedee states he will get rid of the corpse once it is evening. Amedee claims not to have enough strength for the task as he has palpitations of the heart. Madeleine describes how the neighbours have been watching them silently and making disparaging remarks amongst themselves. Amedee painfully and slowly pretends to pull the corpse using a rope tied to it. The audience sees Amedee dressed as a young bridegroom and his young bride Madeleine. Young Amedee describes beautiful landscapes and sweet sounds while young Madeleine describes frightening scenes and discordant sounds.

Amedee is seen in his armchair, describing the world as bleak and hollow. The dream ends and the couple are talking about whether it is time to get rid of the corpse. The corpse is growing rapidly now, its eyes are open yet again and there is a green light and strange music issuing from the bedroom. Mundane domestic noises are overheard from neighbours' houses. Amedee and Madeleine scramble to rearrange the furniture in order to accommodate the corpse.

Amedee prepares to get rid of the corpse but also describes how fond he has become about it. They open the window and Amedee praises the poetic beauty of the night. The street is deserted and they plan to dump the corpse in the nearby river. They discuss the details of their strategy.

They tug the corpse out of the bedroom with great effort. Madeleine is now terrified they will be found out. Amedee reassures her that the only people he is likely to meet are American soldiers leaving a bar; they will be drunk and will not speak the local language. They lower the corpse through the window, with Amedee climbing down the window too.

### 8.3.3 Act III

The scene opens in the small square outside the Buccinioni's flat. There is a bar and brothel and a drunk American soldier is arguing with the owner of the bar. He is demanding whisky and the company of a girl named Mado. Amedee enters, dragging the corpse which is making a clattering noise as though a tin can were tied to it. The soldier accosts Amedee asking about Mado but they do not understand each other's language.

The soldier offers to help Amedee with his burden; Amedee refuses. They have a discussion about the French and English languages while Madeleine is worried that they will be caught. Amedee is spinning around as he speaks, with the body coiling around his waist. The bar-owner enters, along with Mado, who is accompanying another American soldier. The first soldier is glad to meet her. The bar-owner greets Amedee as his tenant and they hear the cops approaching.

A man at the window calls his wife to watch Amedee being chased by the cop. The corpse suddenly unfolds into a huge sail or parachute and Amedee is borne into the air along with it. The American soldiers, Mado and the couple at the window cheer while Amedee starts to fly away. Amedee begs pardon, claiming that it is not his fault and that the wind is bearing him away. Madeleine is worried that Amedee will catch a cold and will also lose his job at the theatre.

Amedee's shoes, his jacket and his cigarettes fall down and are picked up by the policeman and the soldiers. Madeleine thinks Amedee might not return and regrets he didn't finish his play. The policeman invites Madeleine to the bar for free drinks and she heads there. The man at the window and his wife retire to bed as they have to wake early the next day. The wife comments, "Come, Eugene, the show is over." and they close the window.

Alternative ending: Amedee is not seen flying off but is described as such by the bystanders. This version ends with the policeman asking the ladies and gentlemen in the pit to get moving as the show is over.

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## 8.4 Critical Analysis:

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### 8.4.1 Characters:

Amedee is described as a middle-aged middle-class playwright, slightly balding. This sets him apart from the traditional hero.

Amedee is an unsuccessful artist, he has been attempting to complete a play for the past fifteen years. He is childless. There are references to his exhaustion and lack of vitality in the play. These hint at his sterility, even impotence.

Amedee keeps writing the same mundane exchange between an old man and old woman, symbolising the lack of communication between himself and his wife. Critics have interpreted Amedee as reflecting Ionesco's own

frustration that he experienced while writing his first play *The Bald Soprano*.

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Amedee comes across as a recognisable type - the hen-pecked husband who is constantly nagged by his wife. Madeleine is also portrayed as a type, the dominating, outspoken wife with a hesitant husband. She incessantly complains about the housework and Amedee's inability to finish his play.

In the Buccinioni household, the traditional gender roles are reversed. It is Madeleine who is the breadwinner. The fact that she works allows Amedee to pursue his futile artistic endeavour. She earns by operating a telephone switchboard installed in their flat. She juggles her role as switchboard operator with her household responsibility, which is symbolised by her changing of hats.

Though Amedee and Madeleine are set up as types and are also contrasted to one another, they have a lot in common. The marriage doesn't appear to be a successful one, there is no love, passion or even affection between the couple. They are bound together by guilt and fear rather than by any positive emotion. Not having children indicates the sterility of their marriage.

Though the couple initially appear similar to characters in a kitchen-sink drama, this seemingly ordinary pair is hiding a terrible and incongruous secret. There is a corpse in their bedroom and they have been living with it for fifteen years.

The fear of its discovery has led them to cut themselves off from society. The couple leads an isolated existence, reflecting the theme of isolation that is common in existential writing.

They live in constant fear that borders on paranoia. They are afraid that the concierge of the building or their neighbours will discover their guilty secret. The visit by the postman throws Amedee and Madeleine into a panic, even leading Amedee to deny his identity.

The couple is oddly amoral, they seem unaffected by the fact of having killed someone. They do not even recall the details of whom they killed - it could have been a neighbour's baby or Madeleine's illicit lover. They are afraid of discovery, not of being held accountable for the murder. Their guilt and complicity through inaction carries significance in the historical context of the atrocities perpetrated during World War II.

Amedee and Madeleine are unable to communicate with one another. Their conversations are repetitive and sometimes devolve into the meaningless. The young Amedee and young Madeleine who appear in a dream-like sequence in Act II are also unable to communicate with one another. Their world-views are entirely contradictory. Their dialogue ends up as babbling musical notes, foreshadowing the breakdown of communication in their relationship.



Both Amedee and Madeleine are endlessly fascinated by the slowly growing corpse that represents their increasing guilt. They ask each other not to look at the corpse and yet are repeatedly drawn to observe it. Amedee obsessively measures how much the corpse has grown, but is unable to take concrete action to resolve the issue. The couple also struggles to control the rapidly proliferating mushrooms in their flat.

The other characters in the play are minor characters, including the corpse itself. Its identity is vague, but it is that of a man and is observed to be aging. Amedee and Madeleine describe the corpse as having green eyes, white hair and a white beard. They repeatedly talk of closing its eyes but the corpse's eyes remain open and even emit a strange green light in Act III. The open eyes seem to remind the couple of their guilt.

Ironically, it is the corpse that keeps growing throughout the play, while the living couple - Amedee and Madeleine - remain static. They have not changed in years. The corpse seems to grow 'in geometric progression' as Madeleine describes it. The mushrooms grow too and the corpse keeps crowding the already limited space in the Buccinioni's flat. It is also the corpse that aids Amedee's release by turning into a sail or a parachute.

The concierge and the neighbours in the apartment do not appear on stage but their conversations and other domestic noises are heard off-stage. They represent the normal outside world, which is perceived as a threat by the Buccinioni. The couple overhear themselves being discussed and described as strange by the concierge and the neighbours. The mundane domestic noises heard from the neighbours' flats serve as a contrast to the strange existence that the Buccinioni are leading.

The postman who arrives in Act II brings in an element of suspense. Seen as a normal, almost trivial everyday happening, the arrival of the postman creates panic for Amedee and Madeleine. He is perceived as an intruder and a potential threat to their hidden secret. They do not open the door at first. On opening it, Amedee has a repetitive conversation with the postman, attempting to deny that he is the correct recipient of the letter which is addressed to Amedee Buccinioni.

The drunk American soldiers and the prostitute Mado in Act III bring in another contrast to the fearful, dried-up Buccinioni. They are young and represent post-war hedonism. The policeman, the bar owner and a couple in the window form an audience for Amedee's flight.

Typical of the theatre of the absurd, the characters in the play are flat and incongruous. The man in the window and his wife are a cheeky representation of the audience themselves, who are watching the play unfold and will return home to bed, largely unconcerned about the happenings on the stage.

#### **8.4.2 Themes:**

**8.4.2.1 Guilt and complicity:** Guilt is one of the main themes in *Amedee*. The presence of the stranger's corpse in the bedroom of the Buccinioni is

the physical manifestation of the couple's guilt. The simple, ordinary working couple hides a terrible secret. They have been concealing their guilt for fifteen years and live under the constant fear of being discovered.

The corpse grows, slowly at first, then in rapid starts. It represents the accumulating guilt. The feet of the corpse intrude into the couple's living space, crowding them; a visual representation of the guilt that prevents them from leading normal lives. The mushrooms that sprout in the flat even when the couple keep plucking them are another manifestation of guilt. The mushrooms seem to feed on the accumulated guilt and grow larger and more prolific as the play progresses.

The couple has not moved out of their apartment during this entire time. Nor have they had any visitors.

Neither of them can recall the identity of the corpse. It could be a baby that a neighbour had left in their care or an illicit lover of Madeleine. They are indifferent about the murder itself, so indifferent that they have forgotten the details. There is no element of regret that either of them express. Through this Ionesco captures the guilt and horror — of collaboration and moral omission — that nihilated post-WWII European intellectual thought.

**8.4.2.2 Isolation:** The Buccinioni's live in a small apartment, with the corpse stored in the bedroom. They have isolated themselves from the rest of the world and have not stepped out of the flat in fifteen years. Their guilt and fear of discovery has cut them off from almost all human contact. They even buy necessities by lowering a basket tied with a rope for the grocer. Their only interaction is with each other and with the corpse they both try to avoid, yet are endlessly fascinated with.

**8.4.2.3 Sterility:** A strange irony suffuses the entire play. The dead things - the corpse and the mushrooms - grow and spread rapidly, while the lives of the Buccinioni's are marked by sterility. A direct and obvious example is the fact that the couple do not have children; they are either incapable of or unwilling to procreate. Some critics have interpreted the corpse in the bedroom as being symbolic of the couple's relationship. Their desire for each other is dead.

The couple talks about Amedee's lack of energy, his exhaustion and his inability to accomplish things. This could be symbolic of his sterility or even impotence.

At another level, too, Amedee fails to create. He is a playwright but he lacks creative inspiration and has been unable to complete his play for more than fifteen years. He keeps rewriting the same mundane exchange between an old man and an old woman; the story of his play never progresses.

The lack of creativity is not just physical and artistic. The couple also display deadened consciences. They do not exhibit any regret for having killed the man whose corpse is stowed in their bedroom.

**8.4.2.4 Breakdown of language:** The inability of language to convey meaning and the impossibility of meaningful communication is one of the preoccupations of the theatre of the absurd. This preoccupation is reflected in *Amedee* as well. Amedee and his wife engage in repetitive conversation.

Madeleine constantly nags Amedee about not finishing his play and complains about being a slave to the housework. The couple decide not to look at the corpse but their actions never match their words. They are inevitably attracted to look at the corpse while verbally exhorting each other not to do it.

The snippets of speech heard during Madeleine's telephone conversations enhance the sense of the ridiculous.

In the dream scene, the exchange between the couple dissolves into a repetition of a musical phrase, showing their inability to communicate. Amedee's long exchange with the postman is also an example of the breakdown of communication, as is the American soldier's exchange with the owner of the bar and brothel.

**8.4.2.5 Repetition:** As discussed above, the dialogues in the play are characterised by repetition. Additionally, in Ionesco's plays, nearly all forms of human behavior are duly stripped of acculturated meaning, shown to be absurd and out of phase. Amedee, who is writing a play, labors over the same phrases that have occupied him fruitlessly for years. The theme of repetition bears witness to the apparent futility of all human endeavor.

The ridiculous, purposeless behaviour and talk give the plays a comic surface, but there is an underlying serious message of metaphysical distress. This reflects the influence of comic tradition drawn from such sources as *commedia dell'arte*, vaudeville, and music hall combined with such theatre arts as mime and acrobatics.

**8.4.2.6 Release:** The corpse turning into a sail or parachute and helping Amedee float away represents release from the burdening guilt. It could also indicate freedom from the stifling routine of mundane life. Ionesco does not clarify whether the release is a fruitful one which will enable Amedee to rediscover his creativity and finally complete writing his play.

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## 8.5 Staging:

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Ionesco's style was strongly influenced by puppetry. This influence is seen in the strong visual element in his plays, more dependent on gesture and blocking than on the stage set itself, which may range from elaborate to nonexistent. The spoken text itself is, as a rule, the least significant element of Ionesco's dramaturgy, and is literally "upstaged" by the posturing and placement of its characters.

The play has two different endings as Ionesco realised the challenges of portraying Amedee's flight on the stage. In one version, Amedee is depicted as floating away. In the other version, the floating occurs offstage but is described by the bystanders.

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## 8.8 Plot:

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The theatre of the absurd questioned and denied the conventions of a well-made play. Ionesco's *Amedee* also represents this denial of conventional plot development and comprehensible logical action.

The presence of the corpse in the bedroom overshadows the lives of the Buccinionis. The play revolves around their efforts to hide their guilt and later to get rid of it forever. The alternative title '*How to Get Rid of It*' reflects this preoccupation.

Act I is pervaded by a sense of frustration and isolation. Amedee, unable to finish his play, has been writing the same dialogue for fifteen years. Madeleine is tired of working as well as managing the housework. The couple has no contact with the outside world and they also lack any meaningful connection with each other.

The central irony in the play is the lifelessness of the living couple contrasted with the rapidly growing corpse and the proliferating mushrooms. The arrival of the postman creates suspense but does not result in the discovery of the corpse.

Most of Act II is taken up by Amedee's inability to take any kind of action. It reflects the avoidance and waiting that has characterised the couple's life for the past fifteen years. The growing corpse creates a sense of claustrophobia and makes it almost impossible for the couple to continue living in the flat. They have to move the furniture out of the bedroom to make room for the corpse. Nevertheless, by Act III, it has grown too large for the bedroom and its feet begin to invade the drawing room.

The dream sequence in Act II depicts young Amedee and young Madeleine, but even then, they were unable to communicate. They end up uttering musical phrases, which foreshadows the lack of communication that will characterise their married life.

The effort of moving the corpse out of the house is tremendous and the couple is terrified of discovery. In Act III the audience feels a kind of suspense as to whether Amedee will be seen or caught getting rid of the corpse. The actual development comes as a surprise, with the corpse transforming into a sail or parachute and enabling Amedee to float away.

After the claustrophobia and fear that builds up throughout the play, the floating away brings a wondrous, if incongruous, sense of release. The play has an open ending, with Madeleine heading to the bar for free drinks and wondering whether Amedee will ever finish his play.

The play has touches of humour and sarcasm, particularly in the snippets of dialogue overheard from Madeleine's work at the switchboard. Repetition is used very effectively, with the couple's actions and dialogues going round in futile circles. The plot and the dialogues are influenced by puppetry, music hall, farce and pantomime. The couple's struggles to hide the corpse and later get rid of it are reminiscent of farce, while their flat, repetitive actions show the impact of puppetry.

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## 8.7 Set

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Most of the play takes place in the small flat of the Buccinionis. The couple inhabit a room which combines the functions of a drawing room, a dining room and an office. The apartment is small, almost claustrophobic and the furniture is unpretentious. In Act II, the set becomes even more crowded as the bedroom furniture is moved outside to make room for the growing corpse. The mushrooms that grow in the apartment add to the incongruity. Act III is set in the square outside the apartment. The open atmosphere of the square, suffused with the drunken joy of the American soldier, forms a stark contrast to the claustrophobic, isolated apartment.

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## 8.8 Symbolism:

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Amedee, being an absurdist play, denies conventional meaning and defies meaningful analysis. However, the play contains symbols and motifs that highlight the themes.

The most visible and attention-catching symbol in the play is the corpse. It is literal evidence of a crime that they committed. Critics have also interpreted it as a physical manifestation of the couple's guilt. As the corpse inhabits the bedroom, it could also symbolise the lack of passion and affection between the couple.

The fact that the corpse keeps growing is not only absurd, it also reflects the couple's increasing guilt. The corpse crowds their already small living space; this indicates how their guilt is overpowering their ability to lead normal lives. The large mushrooms that grow throughout the flat are further reminders of guilt and the couple's constant plucking of the mushrooms represents their attempt to conceal their guilt.

The telephone switchboard is the couple's only connection to the outside world, apart from the basket they lower for the grocer. The disembodied voices on the telephone add to the sense of the absurd with the snippets of their conversation.

Madeleine's changing of the hat represents her switching roles between telephone operator and housewife.

The postman symbolises the outside world which is perceived as a threat by the couple. A postman is an everyday figure but he becomes a frightening alien in the play. The concierge and the neighbours also stand for the normal outside world and they offer a contrast to the Buccinionis.

Youth and indifferent hedonism are represented by the American soldiers and the prostitute Mado in Act III. The policeman and the bar-owner are bystanders gazing at Amedee's flight. The man in the window and his wife represent the audience themselves, preparing to head home once the play ends.

Amedee's flight could stand for a release from the long-concealed burden of guilt. It is also an escape from the stifling mundane life he leads with Madeleine. Ionesco leaves it for the audience to decide whether Amedee's flight also stands for a rediscovery of his creativity.

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### 8.9 Questions:

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1. Comment on the existentialist themes depicted in Ionesco's *Amedee*.
2. Explain how language is used to create absurdity in Ionesco's *Amedee*.
3. Ionesco's *Amedee* is a reflection of the post-war collapse of morality and meaning. Elaborate this view.
4. Comment on the characterisation in Ionesco's *Amedee*.
5. Analyse Ionesco's *Amedee* as questioning and transgressing the conventional notions of theatre.
6. Explain in detail how Ionesco's *Amedee* contains the features of the theatre of the absurd as outlined by Martin Esslin.
7. Comment on the plot devices used in Ionesco's *Amedee*.

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## STUDY OF THE KITCHEN BY SIR ARNOLD WESKER

### Unit Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Sir Arnold Wesker: An introduction
- 9.2 A brief background of the English drama between 1950s and 60s
- 9.3 Introduction to *The Kitchen*
- 9.4 Detailed Summary of the Play
- 9.5 Critical Interpretation of the Play
- 9.6 Questions
- 9.7 References

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### 9.0 Objectives:

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- To study the importance of the play *The Kitchen* in modern drama
  - To examine the play *The Kitchen* as an anti-capitalist play
  - To study *The Kitchen* as a critique of disenchantment of industrialization
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### 9.1 Sir Arnold Wesker: An introduction

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Arnold Wesker was born in 1932 in a working-class Jewish family of Russo-Hungarian descent. His parents were active communists hence no wonder that Arnold, too, turned to communism in his early life. Like the other youths of his time in England, Wesker, as well, became a social rebel and wanted to change the world. He believed that the marginalized section of the society had been mistreated by the government and society. Wesker did several odd jobs; he worked as a furniture maker's apprentice, kitchen porter, farm laborer, and a pastry cook. These jobs gave him a firsthand experience of working class life, which he later used in his plays. While working as a pastry cook in a hotel in Norwich in 1959, he conceived the idea of his first play *The Kitchen*. Later influenced by John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), Wesker found a cue to writing plays. He is best known for his trilogy –*Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* –(popularly known as 'Wesker Trilogy') which was published in 1959. His socialist leanings persuaded him to write about the social issues. Thus, one can observe that his working-class background, his political thoughts and the then social situation in England had shaped his writing career.

1950s and 60s was the time when the 'angry young men' had emerged in England. Dramatists such as Noel Coward, John Osborne and Shelagh Delaney focused upon the lower middle class and the disillusionment of the British youth after the Second World War. These writers showed overcrowded industrial suburbs and the lives of the impoverished lower middle class in their plays. They also experimented with the technique of drama, especially with the settings of their plays. The plays were often set in kitchens of the lower middle-class families, and hence these plays were called as 'kitchen sink drama'. These plays depict pessimistic characters who have lost every hope of social and economic upliftment.

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## 9.2 A brief background of the English drama between 1950s and 60s:

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The Second World War affected Britain badly. Britain had to end imperialism after WW II and thus it shrunk to a small country. The idea of Welfare state was brought in by the Labour Government in England which came to power after the WW-II. This led the access to the youths to higher education in the working class. But the newly educated class, however, could not find suitable jobs. Alan Carter in his book *John Osborne* (1973) sums up the social situation of the time as: "Many people were fed up, they were bored and had little opportunity for achievement. They were searching for a world they could believe in". (Carter 21). The playwrights of the time brought to the English stage, situations and characters from the industrial and the impoverished rural scenes. This gave an altogether different perspective from the drawing-room comedies of Noel Coward and Terrence Rattigan. As stated earlier, Wesker was influenced by Osborne's plays. In his interview to Simon Tussler he said, "When I saw it, I just recognized that things could be done in the theatre, and immediately went home and wrote *Chicken Soup*" (194). The playwrights of the time were portraying social reality of the time through their writings.

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## 9.3 Introduction to *The Kitchen*:

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*The Kitchen* was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre, London on 13 September 1959. In *The Kitchen* Wesker criticizes the monotonous jobs that the common people have to do. The mechanical, meaningless and repetitive jobs which were brought in by the industrialization led to several social problems. Under the tremendous working pressures, the workers became frustrated. They were not happy with their jobs, they were also paid little hence there was not much economic gain for them too. Wesker shows this with the example of a cook in a kitchen in a restaurant, but it implies that the modern capitalistic jobs in industries and factories are futile as they alienate man from society. Thus, Peter, the protagonist of the play, angrily asks, "What kind of life is that, in a kitchen! Is that a life, I ask you?" Work becomes a kind of enslavement and, as a result, the workers become isolated and depressed. The proverb 'every man is an island' is apt for the play as it shows characters who are

lonely, angry and unhappy with everything – with their master, work and coworkers. This is due to the oppressive routine works, unhygienic and unfriendly working conditions. In the “Notes for the Producer” Wesker explains:

There is the rush, there are the petty quarrels, grumbles, false prides and snobbery. Kitchen staff instinctively hate dining-room staff and all of them hate customer. He is the personal enemy.

These stage directions set the mood of the play.

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## 9.4 Detailed Summary of the Play:

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- **Dramatis personae**

**Peter:** He is the protagonist of the play. He is a young German, who has been working in the restaurant for three years. He is impulsive, passionate, short tempered and imaginative. He loves Monique, a waitress in the restaurant.

**Kevin:** Kevin is a young Irish cook. He is surprised to see the way people work at the restaurant. He is not happy with the working conditions there and is thinking about leaving the job. Since he is a good cook, he is sure that he will get a better opportunity somewhere. He is self-assured but conservative in his thinking.

**Gaston:** Gaston is a middle-aged man; he is in his forties. He is a Cypriot, is impulsive like Peter. This causes a fight between him and Peter.

**Hans:** Another German worker at the restaurant. Hans does not know English well. Peter translates for him and they speak German with one another. He loves Cynthia, a waitress but he is too shy to talk to her.

**Paul:** A young Jew who is in charge of the pastry cook with Raymond. He is calm and reflexive and is not affected by the rush in the restaurant.

**Nicholas:** Like Gaston, he, too, is a Cypriot. He is in charge of the Cold Buffet of the restaurant. He is a drunkard.

**Monique:** She is a waitress, very beautiful. She is married to Monty but has an illicit affair with Peter. Monique is impregnated by Peter and might be carrying his baby. Monique, though, loves Peter, does not want to leave her husband. Her husband provides her materialistic comforts, which she finds very important. She is not a romantic fool who would sacrifice the worldly pleasures for the sake of love.

**Marango:** He is the owner of the restaurant. He is an old man of seventy five and has a very sad face. He is calm and lives a routine life. He wanders around the kitchen at specific times of the day,

checking how things are going on. He is stern, unfriendly and does not treat the workers well even though they earn good money for him.

**Setting of the play:** The play is set in a large kitchen in a restaurant of Tivoli. The actions in the play take place in one day.

**Plot of the play:** The play presents a hectic day in the kitchen of a crowded restaurant. It places all the characters in their routine work. The play is divided into two acts: the first takes place at the lunch time, the second at dinner time. The two acts are separated by an interlude. The action of the play takes place in one day.

**Act I:** The first act begins at seven thirty in the morning. The workers of the first shift begin their work. It begins with a chaos with the nonstop comings and goings of the workers. In the beginning the playwright shows us a crowd of people on the stage – the chef, cooks, the butcher, waitresses and other workers doing their jobs frantically. Their work is accompanied by their incessant talking and shouting, interrupted with fights and quarrels. The earsplitting noises of pans, pots and cutlery add to the chaos and make the workplace more stressful. The workers struggle to accomplish their tasks. There is competition, jealousy and flirtation among workers. Thus, in the beginning of the act, the playwright is successful in showing the workers tensed lives and their challenging working conditions. The kitchen could be compared with a soup pot where all the ingredients are seething and are in a continual boil.

**Interlude:** The noises at the kitchen come to a halt in a break before dinner. In the interlude workers take their supper and make themselves ready for the hectic evening schedule. The peace and quietness could be seen at the kitchen for some time. Now, we could see a more humane picture of the workers; they freely talk to each other, they make jokes and talk about their future. Some workers have a friendly conversation and express their feelings and concerns more freely. The action of the play, thus, moves from the outside world to the inside. Through their conversation readers could understand that they are fed up with their tedious routine work. They have been exhausted, desperate and dissatisfied with their working conditions. They complain about the inhuman treatment given to them by the owner of the restaurant; they also talk about their exploitation by him. Thus, the true motive of the interlude is to give a chance to the working class to talk about their agonies, sorrows and difficulties.

In their free time they play a game in which they are supposed to tell the others about their dreams or expectations or about their future plans. Initially it seems difficult for them because due to their tough job most of them have forgotten their dreams. But slowly they open up and one can observe that some of them have queer fantasies. For example, Nicholas's fantasy is having a cool bottle of drink at hand anytime he desires. Kevin just falls asleep while others are playing

the game. But ironically Peter, who asks others about their future has no future plans. The dramatist, thus, shows that the workers have been so busy that they have forgotten their dreams; they have been so tired that they doze off whenever they get free time. In the modern capitalistic systems workers are not given enough time to take rest. All the workers wish to be from their present work, but they do not have a better option and hence they are stuck. They fantasize about the world abroad, a utopia where working conditions are better and are based on justice and humanity. The kitchen becomes a metaphor of a bigger world; it could also be seen as a symbol of exploitation and unending hard work.

In the interlude we notice that the workers are dissatisfied with their present condition but they only complain and do not take any effective action to improve it. They neither challenge the system nor rebel against the exploitative working conditions. It seems that they want to retain their jobs until they find the better option but they are not willing to quit it no matter how dissatisfied they are with it. The constant income leads them to work at the kitchen. Thus the feelings the workers have for the kitchen is a love-hate one. The subplot of Peter and Monique's relationship also highlights this love-hate relationship. They want to be in a relationship but at the same time are not happy with one another.

**Act II:** After the supper break the workers resume their jobs and they get prepared for a new rush of customers. Among several rapidly moving actions a tramp comes asking for food. He is shoved off initially but is given soup later in an old tin. Peter notices that the soup is stinking and offers the poor man two meat cutlets. Peter's charity is informed to Marango, who disapproves Peter's action. Peter and Monique have been in love with each other; Peter wants Monique to divorce her husband and remarry him. But Monique tells him she will never leave her husband and will not give birth to Peter's child. Upon Monique's confession, Peter loses his temper and starts breaking the utensils in the kitchen. He becomes so violent that in frenzy he breaks the gas lead putting everyone's life in danger. The restaurant is in mess; Peter has been subdued by fellow workers by force. Mango visits the kitchen and is frustrated to witness the chaos. He shouts at Peter angrily for what he has done and feels that it is exclusively sabotage on him. Marango's monologue ends the play. It upends all our expectations about the owner's attitude towards the workers. In his monologue Marango says that he has good intentions towards the workers but he has not been understood by his employees. He says that he has tried to provide the workers welfare and that he has been providing them meals and also paying them well. He is unable to comprehend Peter's ferocity which led to the destruction of the kitchen. This will cost a lot to the owner.

The capitalistic attitude of Marango is evident. He feels that one needs only food and money to survive; and survival is the ultimate

goal of mankind. He does not understand things like job satisfaction, ambition and one's social and economic growth is also important; one does not only live to earn money and to eat food, that would be just a vegetative life.

Peter's violent reaction towards the end of the play is because he is dissatisfied in his professional as well as personal life. He knows that he has little chance of getting a better job and when he finds out that Monique would not leave her husband and marry him, he goes mad.

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## 9.5 Critical Interpretation of the Play:

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The play is a critique of disenchantment of industrialization. One can observe that there is no warmth, love and friendliness among the workers; they are the least interested in each other's lives. When Winnie had miscarriage, no one stops working and ironically no one knew that she was pregnant! There is even a kind of animosity among the workers. When Kevin, another cook in the kitchen takes Peter's chopping board, Peter snatches it from him. He is not ready to help Kevin by any means. The workers in the kitchen are frustrated because firstly they do not enjoy their job, there is no job satisfaction and secondly, they feel trapped in the place; they do not see a way out of this place. Probably, they will not get a better job than this. Dimitri is a talented man. He has made a portable record player. It shows that he is good at making electronic gadgets but his talent goes waste as he has to work in the kitchen.

Another noticeable feature of the play is its short, crisp dialogues. The large numbers of characters are given short, crisp dialogues through which the action of the play moves fast. Characters often do not talk on one subject and they do not speak full sentences either. They keep on changing the topics of their talk and they do not seem to listen to one another. There is a lack of communication among the characters, which is a contemporary reality of working places. When Alferdo greets Max with 'Good morning!', Max just points at his work and suggests to mind his business instead of greeting him. When Hans's face gets burnt no one seems to be much affected as they all continue with their jobs. Frank discourages a waitress who wants to help Frank by saying, "He'll live. (To the crowd) All, right, it's all over, come on". The accident which could have been fatal is taken very casually by Frank.

The theme of alienation is dominant in the play. Man becomes alienated in the modern capitalistic world. The odd jobs, such as the one in the kitchen of the restaurant, do not give any joy to workers. They experience loss of dignity and freedom at their working places. The unfriendly atmosphere and the hot humming ovens at the kitchen make workers uncomfortable. Peter is so much frustrated that he axes the gas lines to bring the ovens to halt. Thus, Wesker points out that too much work pressure, unfriendly atmosphere and agonizing working places can lead to violence and destruction. Marengo, the owner of the restaurant never provided good



facilities to his workers. He was not concerned with the working conditions at his restaurant. He is unable to comprehend the reason of Peter's violent act. He says:

I don't know what more to give a man. He works, he eats, I give him money. This is life, isn't it? I haven't made a mistake, have I? I live in the right world, don't I? . . . What is there more? What is there more? What is there more?

Marango is of the view that man just needs food and money to live happily.

Their normal human attitude has been affected; they are not only bad tempered, reluctant towards each other but also ready to harm one another. The aspect of alienation in the modern world is touched by Paul. He says, "And the horror is this – that there's a wall, a big wall between me and millions of people like him." He implies that he is unable to connect himself with the rest of the world.

Wesker in "Notes for the Producer" himself gives the statement of the play. He says:

The world might have been a stage for Shakespeare, but to me it is a kitchen: where people come and go and cannot stay long enough to understand each other, and friendships, loves, and enmities are forgotten as quickly as they are made.

Through the play he criticizes the meaningless mechanical life in the contemporary industrial society. The chaotic rush in the kitchen symbolizes the hectic rush in modern industries and factories. There is no plot as such in the play; not much happens in the play. It is because the playwright focuses more on the characters rather than the action. We see the characters working in the kitchen. Along with their work in the kitchen the playwright also depicts their loves, jealousies, failures and personal affairs. Marango, the owner of the restaurant is criticized for his attitude towards the workers but an attack is directed to the machines too.

Peter is completely crushed towards the end of the play. When Monique hints at staying with her husband and suggests that she will not marry Peter, he gets utterly frustrated. He finds a vent for his anger when a waitress has just helped herself to her order while Peter was at work. He gets mad at her just for a trivial reason and smashes dishes and crockery to the floor. A. D. Chaudhari in his book "Contemporary British Drama" rightly comments that, "Peter, the central character, and all his associates, have no vision before them." They are dissatisfied with their work, their life, nervous about losing their jobs and eager to escape the drudgery. The workers and the master – Marango – both live a senseless life. Peter declares

He is not a man, he is a restaurant. He goes to market at five-thirty in the morning; returns here, reads the mail, goes up to the office. Half an hour after we come back he is here again, till nine-thirty, maybe ten at night.

Every day, morning to night. What kind of life is that, in a kitchen! Is that a life, I ask you?

Study of The Kitchen  
by Sir Arnold Wesker

Thus Peter is against the repetitive, meaningless and unproductive way of the life; the life where there is no novelty and excitement. Here, one can observe that Peter is more sensitive than others. Peter is not like Gaston or Marango, who measure everything in terms of money. Peter is craving for a meaningful life. During the short break after the lunch-hour rush he asks his coworkers what they want from life. Thus, in a way the question is projected towards the audience / readers. Dimitri dreams of the independent life of a radio mechanic, Kevin wants to have a happy sleep, Hans is eager to earn more money, Raymond needs women, whereas Peter and Paul crave for human understanding. He compares the life of fulfillment and the life of aimless drudgery. Peter's and Paul's attitude towards life could be compared to Marango's when Marango asks, "He works, he eats, I give him money. This is life, isn't it? What more do you want? What is there more, tell me?" Money is of the utmost important thing in life. But the playwright implies the importance of life over material possessions.

Peter is the mouthpiece of the playwright's socialistic attitudes. Peter angrily remarks:

We work here – eight hours a day, sweat our guts, and yet – it's nothing. We take nothing. Here – the kitchen, here – you. You and the kitchen. And the kitchen don't mean nothing to you and you don't mean to the kitchen nothing. . . The world is filled with kitchens only some they call offices and some they call factories.

This halting speech clearly states the author's thesis. The play revolves around the theme of betrayal, love, jealousy and anger and gives an account of a whole day about the lives of the kitchen workers. At last, the central motif of the play emerges out that how a positive attitude of mankind is destroyed by the industrialization of the society. The extreme work pressure changes the human side of a person into a brutal and machine-like with zero feelings and emotions left.

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## 9.6 Questions:

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1. Justify *The Kitchen* as a critique of disenchantment of industrialization.
2. Examine the characterization by Wesker in the play *The Kitchen*.
3. Discuss the alienation as the major theme of the play.
4. Examine *The Kitchen* as an anti-capitalist play.
5. How well has Wesker portrayed meaninglessness of life in the modern world in the play? Substantiate your answer with examples from the play.

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## STUDY OF THE REZ SISTERS BY TOMSON HIGHWAY

### Unit Structure

- 10.0 Objectives
- 10.1 About the Author
- 10.2 Historical Context
- 10.3 List of Characters
- 10.4 Plot Summary
- 10.5 Critical Overview
- 10.6 Questions
- 10.7 References

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### 10.0 Objectives

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- To study the play *The Rez Sisters* by Tomson Highway
  - To examine various themes and techniques employed by Highway in the play
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### 10.1 About the Author

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Tomson Highway, sometimes referred to as an exotic figure in Canadian theatre and the most important one in the latter half of 1980s. He is one of the few writers who work in their second language. Very much a man of music and other performing arts, Highway graduated in Honours with Music and English. After graduation, he worked for a number of native support groups. Highway was especially influenced by James Reaney's Donnelly trilogy because of its use of its poetic language, imagery and its mythological overtones. His bondage with theatre is apparent when he states, "theatre for me gives the oral tradition a three-dimensional context, telling stories by using actors and visual aspects of the stage". While at Western, during his work with Reaney on *The Canadian Brothers and Wacousta*, he was highly influenced by the playwright as he felt that Reaney wrote about working class people, grass root people, basic people from many places. Through his plays, Highway set out to combine his knowledge of Indian reality in Canada with classical structure, artistic language. "It amounted to applying sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk". In less than three years and only two plays, Canadian audience started considering Highway a member of a select group of playwrights whose plays are treated as significant cultural events by Canadian critics, scholars and audiences. Both these plays i.e. *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* were winners of the

coveted Dora Mavor Moore award. The play *The Rez Sister* was composed by Tomson Highway, a Cree from the Brochet reserve in northern Manitoba, toward the end of the 20th century. Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* illustrate ideas of strengthening and group advancement. A team of seven native ladies, all sisters in some way, come together despite their hostility towards each other and form a group. Through their adventure to The Biggest Bingo in the World the sisters want to accomplish a shared objective, taking responsibility for themselves and for each other. The sisters discover the power in their team and inside each other to confront their fears. Each one of them needs something from The Biggest Bingo in The World they are missing something from life. They locate their heavenly needs satisfied through each other in spite of losing the Bingo and their money related dreams and ambitions.

### Plays:

- **The Rez Sisters (1986)**-Seven women living on the fictional Wasychigan Hill Indian Reserve, all related by blood, adoption, or marriage, raise money to attend —the biggest bingo in the world and to bring one of the sisters, Marie-Adele Starblanket, to a doctor's appointment in Toronto. In the preparation and on the journey, the women reveal their stories and their relationships with each other. A male Nanabush, who is recognized only by the dying Marie-Adele and the mentally disabled Zhaboonigan, appears as a seagull, a black bird, and as the bingo master.
- *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing (1989)*-A counterpart to *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips* also takes place on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, and follows seven men who live on the reserve through the lens of hockey. Nanabush appears as a female figure in this play. More violent than *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips* has provoked more controversy. It looks at misogyny and alcoholism, family, and hope. Rape is a metaphor for colonial violence as well as a dramatically enacted reality in this play.
- **Rose (2003)**-The third play in Highway's intended 7-play series about the Rez, *Rose* is again set on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve and follows the story of Chief Big Rose. It tackles contemporary issues like casinos (the women, including characters from *Rez Sisters*, fight to stop one being built), land claims, treaties, and provincial politicians (Bob Rae). Similar themes to the two previous plays include violence against women and the preservation of Indigenous culture and language.
- *Aria (2003)*
- *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout (2005)*-This play is about the people of the Thomson River Valley preparing for a visit by Sir Wilfred Laurier in 1910 to hear a list of concerns from local Indigenous chiefs. It follows the preparations of four women from the Shuswap, Okanagan and Thomson nations, and is laden with humour and playfulness. It is based on historic events.

## Fiction:

- ***Kiss of the Fur Queen (1998)***—This elegantly structured narrative tells of two Cree brothers and their journey from their home in northern Manitoba to residential school and then to Winnipeg. Common themes to Highway's other work: trickster figure (the Fur Queen), family, impact of residential schools, religious conversion.

## Other works:

- Caribou Song (2001)—Children's fiction
- Dragon Fly Kites (2002)—Children's fiction
- Fox on the Ice (2003)—Children's fiction
- Comparing Mythologies (2002)—Non-fiction essay

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## 10.2 Historical Context:

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*The Rez Sisters* was considered ground-breaking theatre in its day because it was a play by an Indigenous playwright about Indigenous people. It was an insider's view of the hard life on the reserve, and as a result, it is a play that needs to unfold its riches in the fullness of time. In this production, however, director Jessica Carmichael presents us with a full-frontal assault that drowns out the action and dialogue. The sprawling play focuses on seven women on a fictional First Nation reserve on Manitoulin Island, six of whom are either sisters, half-sisters or sisters-in-law. The seventh is the adopted daughter of one of them. An eighth, silent male character represents Nanabush, the spiritual guide and trickster, who wanders among the women as an agent of joy, discord and transformation. While their mean street days are mostly spent squabbling with each other, hurling insults, or engaging in gossip, what brings the women together is the dream of winning big at bingo. When they hear about "The Biggest Bingo in the World" that is going to be held in Toronto, they work hard to raise the money to get there. The play tracks their journey from the reserve to Toronto and back again in dialogue that jumps from humour to darkness in dizzying leaps. Along the way, backstories are revealed, along with the women's biggest hopes and fears.

Describing the initial reaction to *The Rez Sisters*, Highway remarked to Canadian Literature's Johnston, "I'm sure some people went to the play expecting crying and complaining and plenty of misery, reflecting everything they have heard about or witnessed on reserves. They must have been surprised. All that humour and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology." These values are found in the attitudes of the women towards both Wasy and each other, and the best way to explore the cultural context of *The Rez Sisters* is to consider what its author has said about the role of spirituality and mythology in Cree and other Native cultures. 1986 saw the disaster at the Soviet Union's Chernobyl nuclear power plant (which is estimated to cause anywhere from 6,500 to 45,000 future deaths by cancer caused by radiation); as if commenting on this tragedy, during his tenure as artistic director for the Native Earth Performing Arts, Inc., Highway once stated, "At a time in



our history, as a community of human beings, when the world is about to get literally destroyed, and all life forms have a very good chance of being completely obliterated—at a crucial time like this, Native people have a major statement to make about the profound change that has to come about in order for the disaster to be averted.” The statement to which Highway refers here is, of course, the play itself, which offers viewers a look at the spirituality of seven women and how this spirituality plays a role in their daily lives. In several interviews, Highway has talked at length about the Trickster, who appears in *The Rez Sisters* as Nanabush, his role in Native culture and the effect of Christianity on Native beliefs. The Trickster “occupies a central role for us,” Highway told Conlogue in the *Globe and Mail*, “just as Christ does for Christians. But there are three important differences. Trickster has a sense of humour. He was never crucified. And he is neither male nor female.” The Trickster’s sense of humour is found in *The Rez Sisters*, for example, when he transforms into the showy and bombastic Bingo Master. “The way of Nanabush is the way of joy and laughter,” Highway said in Maclean’s. “Contrast that with Christianity- the way of pain and tears.” Highway sees one of his artistic goals as reacquainting Native people with their own mythologies, which, as he stated in *Contemporary Challenges*, were “almost destroyed or . . . obliterated by the onslaught of missionaries.” Describing the reaction to his second play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway told Enright in *Border Crossings* that he was “shocked to discover that mainstream audiences knew more about the size of Elizabeth Taylor’s breasts . . . than they did about their own systems of gods and goddesses.”

This is not to say that only Native audiences can learn from Highway’s depiction of Native spirituality; on the contrary, Highway has studied many mythologies from around the world and seeks to educate non-Native audiences about the way and teachings of Nanabush: “We are not a highly intellectualized or highly technologized society,” he told Enright, “but we have not sacrificed our spiritual centre.” While only two of his “rez sisters” can recognize Nanabush, this does not imply that the others have lost touch with their spiritual heritage: other characters speak of legendary figures, such as Windigo, a giant and Bingo Betty, a local ghost who haunts “the rez,” “hovering in the air above the bingo tables, playing bingo like it’s never been played before.” However, Highway is not implying that one culture is superior to another or more inherently “right”; rather, as he told Bemrose in Maclean’s, he feels that, “If we could combine the best of both cultures Native and Western, we could create something really beautiful: a society that is not structured to pollute or hoard bombs.” An interesting historical footnote to this comment is that, in 1986, a stalemate occurred in the nuclear disarmament talks between President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, illustrating just how important “hoarding bombs” is too much of the world.

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### 10.3 List of Characters:

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Study of The Rez Sisters  
by Tomson Highway

1. **Annie Cook:** The 36-year-old sister of Marie-Adele and half-sister of Pelajia and Philomena, Annie hopes to be a country singer and someday marry her boyfriend, Fritz, who is a Jewish country musician. She delights in gossiping about the activities of “Big Joey,” a local man who sleeps with a variety of women. Her daughter, Ellen, lives in a neighbouring town with her boyfriend and writes her to tell her about the upcoming bingo game in Toronto.
2. **Emily Dictionary:** Recently returned to the Wasy reservation, Emily is the 32-year-old sister of Annie (and half-sister of Pelajia and Philomena). Described as “one tough lady,” Emily’s coarse language and rough exterior are the results of an abusive ten-year marriage and the death, years later, of a female lover in San Francisco. Her rough exterior gradually gives way as her relationship with her traveling companions deepens. At the play’s end she reveals that she is pregnant and that Big Joey is the father.
3. **Philomena Moosetail:** Philomena is Pelajia’s 49-year-old sister and the voice of practicality among the seven women. She is light-hearted and often cracks jokes. She hopes to win enough money to buy a toilet that is “big and white and very wide.” Late in the play, she reveals that she once had to give up her child.
4. **Nanabush:** The traditional “Trickster” that features prominently in Cree and other Native American and North American culture, Nanabush is, according to Highway, “as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology.” Described as “essentially a comic, clownish sort of character,” Nanabush “teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth.” In the play, Nanabush appears disguised as a seagull, a nighthawk, and the Bingo Master. It is he who takes Marie-Adele to the spirit world when she dies at the bingo game.
5. **Pelajia Patchnose:** The natural leader of “the rez sisters,” the 53-year-old Pelajia Patchnose dreams of a life away from the reservation the women refer to as Wasy. After her return from the bingo game, she decides (as Dennis W. Johnston describes in Canadian Literature), to use her leadership talents “to genuinely improve conditions on the reserve rather than just to complain about them.”
6. **Zhaboonigan (zah-boon-i-gan) Peterson:** Zhaboonigan is the 24-year-old mentally disabled adopted daughter of Veronique. Her parents died in a “horrible car crash” twenty-two years ago and Veronique has raised the girl since then. Only she and Marie-Adele can see Nanabush when he appears; in one instance, she tells the Trickster of a time that she was sexually abused by two white boys.

7. **Veronique St. Pierre:** The 45-year-old sister-in-law to the other women, Veronique complains about her alcoholic husband when not caring for Zhaboonigan Peterson, her adopted daughter, who has mental deficiencies. After Marie-Adele's death, Veronique moves into the Starblanket home to care for the fourteen children and cook for them on Marie-Adele's stove, an example (like her adopting Zhaboonigan) of her sweet nature and concern for others' well-being.
8. **Marie-Adele Starblanket:** Suffering silently from cancer, the 39-year-old Marie-Adele is the "mother figure" of the play. She lives with her husband, Eugene, and her fourteen children, for whom she hopes to win enough money to buy an island paradise where they can live "real nice and comfy." She dies during the bingo game in Toronto, where her spirit is symbolically transported to the spirit world.

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#### 10.4 Plot Summary:

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*The Rez Sisters*: the first in an intended cycle of seven plays, is raucous mix of the comic and the tragic, full of life and dreams. The play spans a summer in 1986, when seven women—all related by birth or marriage — decide to participate in The Biggest Bingo in the World. The plot of the play, though not too thick, is fast moving, at times even frenetic. The strength of the plot depends on the cyclical character movements rather than the plot line. "The rez sisters are vibrantly alive and endowed with titanic energy" observes Penny Petrone in *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Nothing is private for them; they know everything about each other, including their health problems, family histories, daily routines and even sex habits. They insult and ridicule one another relentlessly but always care no matter what. These reservation sisters are strong characters and when they clash, sparks fly. When they need support, all are there for each other. They are lively with humour as a force to make their lives easier and to get them through dark times. The rez sisters live on the imaginary reserve of Wasaychigan Hill on Manitoulin Island. Living on a separate geographical location, away from the mainstream community, not only gives Highway's character a distinct personality, but also offers them a different world view. Moreover, as the dramatist indicates in his notes, Wasaychigan means window in Ojibway. Thus, the reserve functions as a metonym for native communities across the country — looking out on the conspicuous indicators of an economically powerful white society and looking in at its own signs of self-destruction and self-preservation. *The Rez Sisters* self-preservation depends on the optimism and their positive outlook. Pain and suffering, though disheartens never destroy them, rather they toughen them.

- **Act One**

*The Rez Sisters* opens on a late August day on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve (or as its residents refer to it, "Wasy") on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Pelajia Patchnose is found nailing shingles to her

roof, with the assistance of her sister, Philomena Moosetail. Pelajia's first line, "Philomena. I want to go to Toronto," reveals her desire to escape what she sees as her dull life in "plain, dusty, boring old Wasy." "Everyone here is crazy," she complains. "No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush"- who is also known as "The Trickster," a mythological spirit that observes and sometimes enters into the action of the play. After complaining more about the fact that there are no paved roads in Wasy, Philomena lifts her sister's spirits with her wit and by falling off the roof. Annie Cook, their half-sister, arrives and the three talk of their beloved hobby: bingo. Eager to run to the post office, where a parcel awaits her, Annie leaves and the two remaining sisters talk of how the bingo games in Wasy "are getting smaller and smaller all the time." The scene changes to Marie-Adele Starblanket's house down the hill from Pelajia's, where she is throwing stones at Nanabush, disguised as a seagull. When Nanabush tells her "As-tum (Come)," she replies, "I cannot fly away. I have no wings. Yet. Her conversation is interrupted when her sister-in-law, Veronique St. Pierre, enters with her mentally disabled adopted daughter, Zhaboonigan Peterson. Veronique and Marie-Adele discuss a used car purchased by an acquaintance before moving onto a more serious topic: Marie-Adele's cancer. Veronique questions Marie-Adele about who will take care of her fourteen children after she "goes to the hospital"; Marie-Adele replies that her husband, Eugene, will carry this load. The topic shifts to the real motive of Veronique's visit: to tell Marie-Adele that she heard a rumor that "The Biggest Bingo in the World" is coming to Toronto and to ask Marie-Adele if she wants to play. Annie arrives, learns of the upcoming bingo game, and all four of them walk together to the post office. On the way, Marie-Adele, Annie, and Veronique pause to tell the audience about their hopes for the upcoming game: Marie-Adele wants to buy an island where she can live with her family, Annie hopes to buy a complete country-music record library, and Veronique imagines herself cooking for everyone over a brand-new stove. Arriving at the post office (which doubles as a general store), the women meet Emily Dictionary (Annie's sister and half-sister of all the others). Described as "one tough lady," Emily is an ex-biker who lived in California for years but has returned to Wasy. Instigated by only a few remarks, the women all begin a massive, free-for-all war of insults in which their suspicions and jealousies of each other are revealed to the audience. While the women bicker, Zhaboonigan wanders outside and talks to Nanabush, telling him of a time when she was sexually abused by two white boys. After the women stop fighting, Annie opens her parcel and finds a Patsy Cline record (a gift from her daughter) and the confirmation of the rumor regarding "The Biggest Bingo in the World," which will take place in Toronto on September 8. Marie-Adele reads a letter from a hospital in Toronto, confirming her appointment for tests on September 10. The women decide to travel to Toronto, play bingo, take Marie-Adele to undergo her tests, and then return. But when

they ask their local Band Council for a loan (which would enable them to rent a car), their request is refused.

- **Act Two**

In order to think of ways to raise enough money for their trip, the seven women hold a meeting in Pelajia's basement. They decide to use Eugene's van, but they also realize that they will need a total of \$1,400 in order to pay for food and expenses. To raise this money, the women undertake a variety of odd jobs, presented to the audience in a long and humorous pantomime sequence. Finally, the money is raised and the women enter the van that, they hope, will take them to the \$500,000 bingo jackpot. Enroute to Toronto, the women have various conversations while others sleep; from these conversations, the audience learns about their respective pasts, hopes, and fears. Philomena, for example, explains that September 8 holds a special significance for her, since it is the birthday of her child that she had to give up as soon as it was born. Annie tells of her boyfriend Fritz, a Jewish country singer whom she hopes will marry her. Suddenly, a tire blows out and must be replaced. As the women change the tire, Marie-Adele wanders off and is attacked by Nanabush in the form of a nighthawk. Understanding that this is an omen of her death, Marie-Adele begs him for mercy: "Oh no! Me? Not yet. Give me time. Please." Once the tire is changed, they resume their trip and conversations. Marie-Adele tells of Eugene's distress over her condition, which Pelajia explains with, "There is only so much Eugene can understand . . . He is only human." Emily then reveals why she returned to Wasy: her lover, a member of her all-female biker gang, was killed on a San Francisco highway. The tension in the van is almost unbearable, until Emily acknowledges her gratefulness to the others. Relieved, she gives a "high-five" to Zhaboonigan and the stage transforms onto the site of the long-awaited bingo game. The Bingo Master- who is also Nanabush, this time in a new disguise- greets the women and the audience, who actually play a warm-up game of bingo with the cast. However, once the actual big-money game begins, the women express their distress at their lack of fortune. Finally, they rush the grandstand and destroy the bingo machine while "out of this chaos emerges the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master." The Bingo Master suddenly changes into the nighthawk and carries Marie-Adele to the spirit world, signifying her death.

The action then returns to Wasy, where the six women sing the Ojibway funeral song over Marie-Adele's grave and then talk at the store. As a kind of renewal in the face of Marie-Adele's death, Emily announces that she is pregnant with "Big Joey's" (a local man's) child. Veronique assumes the role of mother to Marie-Adele's children and is seen cooking for them on the departed sister's stove. The play's final scene occurs at the same place it began: Pelajia's roof, where she is still nailing shingles and joking with Philomena,



who did win enough money to buy a new toilet. As Pelajia considers all of the changes for which she will work on the reserve, Nanabush dances to the beat of her hammer, unseen by her but appearing “merrily and triumphantly” to the audience.

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## 10.5 Critical Overview:

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*The Rez Sisters* was first performed at the National Canadian Centre of Toronto on November 26, 1986. Critical response to the play was overwhelmingly positive. In a 1987 edition of Canadian Fiction Magazine, Daniel David Moses stated, “The majority of Native people, forced to inhabit ignored, economically disadvantaged areas called reserves, are not encouraged to regard their own lives as important. The accomplishment of *The Rez Sisters* is that it focuses on a variety of such undervalued lives and brings them up to size.” Thomas King, who published an excerpt from the play in his anthology *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*, applauded Highway for his portrayal of the “rez” community and his ability to present a community as “the intricate webs of kinship that radiate from a native sense of family.” Highway has also received acclaim for his positive and optimistic look at his characters, as well as the way that he presents the inner lives of these women to the audience. Carol Bolt, writing in *Books in Canada* called the play a “freewheeling, unforgettable journey in terrific company, the Rez sisters, all of them full of energy and honesty and dreams and life.” Writing in a 1990 edition of the *Canadian Theatre Review*, William Peel echoed Bolt by saying that Highway “has carved out a number of memorable portraits” and that his “achievement lies not only in the characters he has created, but in his masterful orchestration of the action through which these characters are revealed.” Indeed, his skill at characterization has won Highway his greatest acclaim: in *Canadian Literature*, Denis W. Johnston stated, “A reading of some of the women’s individual stories- a character’s ‘through-line’ in theatrical terminology will help to demonstrate how the strength of the play depends on cyclical character journeys rather than on the plot line.” Praise has also been sung for Highway’s ability to emphasize the culture of his Native characters in a manner that is accessible to non-Native audiences. John Bemrose, writing in *Maclean’s* called Highway a playwright “who has learned to straddle two worlds with more grace than most people manage in one.” The *Toronto Globe and Mail’s* Conlogue praised Highway’s art on similar grounds, stating that “Highway embodies the customary contradictions of living in two worlds at once, native and white, but he embodies them with a special intensity because, simply put, he is outrageously talented.” Johnston remarked that although the play is one that is concerned with Native women, it is also a play with a universal message “about people and their dreams and their fears. That these people happen to be Native women, reflecting some problems of their particular place in contemporary society, asserts one feature only of the play’s appeal.”

When *The Rez Sisters* was brought to the New York Theatre Workshop in New York City, it received a negative review in the influential New York



Times. As critic David Richards wrote: "All of the play's shortcomings, and none of Highway's assets, are readily apparent . . . [Highway] plots scenes clumsily and states points baldly. When the dialogue is supposed to be ribald, it rarely rises above the level of adolescent bathroom humour." However, Richards's review mainly finds fault with the production rather than the play: "the drama, which has won numerous awards in Canada, has to be more surprising than this ramshackle staging would suggest." He further stated that "Mr. Highway's strongest gift, an ability to capture flamboyant personalities with their defenses down, remains largely unexploited" because "few of the actresses show any signs of theatrical sophistication. Raw gusto, more than anything else, distinguishes their collective endeavors." Despite such negativity, Highway's ability to offer a glimpse of Native life without alienating non-Native audiences is one of the reasons why the play was nominated for and awarded the Dora Mavor Moore Award for best new play of the 1986-87 Canadian theatre season. The play was also chosen as a runner-up for the Floyd S. Chalmers Award for outstanding Canadian play of 1986). In addition to these prizes, *The Rez Sisters* was selected in 1988 as one of only two productions to represent Canada at the Edinburgh Festival.

Tomson Highway places in violent juxtaposition the cultural and spiritual values of Native and non-Native Canadians. Although there is in some respects a cultural accommodation and a positive integration of some of the materialistic products of a White capitalistic society, the negative consequences of cultural collision are played out in the lives of the women and men who constitute the Native community are in deep turmoil because of the colonial interference. Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* (performed 1986, published 1988), about seven women who travel from the fictional Wasayshigan Hill Indian Reserve to Toronto to try to win the "Biggest Bingo in the World." While revealing how detrimental the materialism of white culture, as reflected in their obsession with bingo, has been to the women's lives, Highway also depicts the mutually supportive environment and sense of community that they provide for each other. Their efforts to raise funds through bake sales, babysitting, and so forth to finance their trip to Toronto demonstrate their ability to work cooperatively to attain their goals. The play shows the essential humanism, life-affirming and hopeful world view of Native peoples, who are natives or the First Nation, who are giving way for the colonial spaces which have changed their cultural and social behaviour. Drawing on the definitions of Homi K. Bhabha, Sheila Rabillard, in an insightful and comprehensive analysis, sees Tomson Highway's plays in terms of the 'hybrid': 'a space of colonial discourse in which the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery, a space which has been systematically denied by both colonialists and nationalists who have sought authority in the authenticity of 'origins'. It is precisely as a separation from 'origins' and 'essences' that this colonial space is constructed.

Among Tomson Highway's many accomplishments, his play *The Rez Sisters* (1986) brought Native voices to the national stage, encouraging the growth of a strong Native theatre community in Canada. *The Rez Sisters* was the first play by an Aboriginal playwright to tour the country.

Impulses of preservation, recovery, and moving forward pervade Tomson Highway's writing. His words here explain one motivation of this work: the claiming of our words as a people, as a distinct culture. For non-Indigenous people as well, his writing and that of other Indigenous writers presents a powerful opportunity. Education that seeks to interrupt colonial structures needs to value Indigenous authors and authorities, and there is much to learn from Indigenous cultures. The distinct culture Highway refers to is not a culture lost in time, but a present-day culture based in a history and mythology both deeply rooted in the North American continent and responding to recent historical changes with creativity and resilience.

*The Rez Sisters* is rooted in the western dramatic tradition and in Indigenous storytelling. Funny and challenging, it has the power to move its audiences, to expose and interrupt assumptions, and to provoke thought. *The Rez Sisters*, highlights Indigenous theatre in Canada, and racism in the classroom. Seven women living on the fictional Wasychigan Hill Indian Reserve, all related by blood, adoption, or marriage, raise money to attend the biggest bingo in the world and to bring one of the sisters, Marie-Adele Starblanket, to a doctor's appointment in Toronto. In the preparation and on the journey, the women reveal their stories and their relationships with each other. A male Nanabush, who is recognized only by the dying Marie-Adele and the mentally disabled Zhaboonigan, appears as a seagull, a black bird, and as the bingo master.

Even in a simplified account of the plot of *The Rez Sisters*, a cultural mélange is evident. The seven women--sisters, half-sisters, step-sisters - all hope to realize their particular dreams by winning the jackpot at "Biggest Bingo in the World" in Toronto. The means, then, is heavily compromised by non-White popular culture, and even the ends the women's goals are pervasively in terms of materialistic White society: Pelajia wants paved roads for the Rez, her sister Philomena wants an indoor bathroom with a large white toilet on which she can enthrone herself; Annie, who is infatuated with a Jewish country singer, wants the biggest record-player in the world on which to play country music; Veronique, who is infatuated with doctrinal Christianity, wants the biggest stove on the Rez. These short-term goals are primarily unconscious tactics for psychological survival, providing a way of addressing physical needs and of ameliorating current living conditions. They represent an accommodation with White society, but cannot address the consequences of cultural collision. The negative consequences of the opposition of cultural codes are manifested in the "so many things" that each woman has to forget: Emily Dictionary was beaten daily by her husband of ten years before she left him the implication being that violent male behaviour is the result of alcohol abuse, which itself is a consequence of cultural collision. Philomena was abandoned by a White lover, and had to give up her baby; as a result, she does not know who her child is a clear indicator of loss of cultural identity. Zhaboonigan, Veronique's mentally disabled adopted daughter, has been raped by a gang of White boys. She relives this rape in the play at a point when the other women are in a state of anarchic conflict before they finally resolve to work together to raise the necessary money

for the trip to Toronto. Highway cuts through the comic mayhem with a graphic account of rape which is an undeniable indicator of the violence inflicted on one Native woman. Rape may function as a metaphor for the intrusive, destructive impact of one society on another in this play, as it does in *Dry Lips*, but it is also a cruel fact: Zhaboonigan whose name means “needle” or “going-through-things” was assaulted by two White boys with a screwdriver, and left bleeding by the side of the road. Highway has explained in a talk at the University of Victoria in 1992 that this rape is based on an event which took place in a small town in Manitoba: Helen Betty Osborne, a young Native girl, was gang-raped and murdered by young White men and penetrated fifty-six times with a screwdriver. Although many people in the town knew about the incident, only one youth of the four was brought to trial, and received a very light sentence. Cultural collision is also strongly indicated in another recollection of violence suffered by a Native woman in *The Rez Sisters*. After leaving her abusive husband, Emily Dictionary joins a gang of Native lesbian “biker chicks” in San Francisco, one of whom, Rose, has been driven to self-destruction by her experience of “how fucking hard it is to be an Indian in this country” (97). Refusing to give way, to give in, she drives her bike down the middle of the highway, and goes head-on into a big 18-wheeler a graphic symbol for the destructive force of a dominant culture. Emily, however, with the spray of her lover's blood on her neck, drives on ‘straight into daylight,’ back to her home on the Wasaychigan Reserve. She has no urge to self-destruct through direct confrontation. And it is Emily Dictionary who conceives a baby in a one-night stand with the Rez stud, Big Joey. A form of transformation is affected through this promise of a new life, in which Zhaboonigan in particular takes great pleasure. Highway is uncompromisingly idealistic in his hope for an improved life in the next generation of children, whom he sees as ‘magical’ in their possibilities.

In *The Rez Sisters*, the many children of Marie-Adele fourteen in total the number seven and its multiples recur in Highway's plays, having mystical significance in Native mythology also suggest the possibility of a flourishing Native culture. And the tragic, ironic death of Marie-Adele of ovarian cancer is also constructed as a magical transformation. Through the agency of the shape-shifter, Nanabush, she is brought to an acceptance of her death, and its horror and cruelty metamorphose into a welcoming of the ‘ever soft wings’ which provide a final relief from her pain. Nanabush, the trickster figure in *The Rez Sisters* and move to Kapuskasing, teaches the meaning of existence on earth by embodying its many contradictions. Death is cruel and final, but it is also a transformation part of the continuing cycle of life, as Raven, another trickster figure, suggests in Lee Miracle's novel, Raven song:

‘Death is transformative,’ Raven said to earth from the depths of the ocean. The sound rolled out, amplifying slowly. Earth heard Raven speak. She paid no attention to the words; she let the compelling power of them play with her sensual self. Her insides turned; a hot burning sensation flitted about the stone of her. Earth turned, folded in on herself, a shock of

heat shot through her. It changed her surface, the very atmosphere surrounding her changed.

In *The Rez Sisters*, Nanabush, played by a male dancer, manifests himself as a seagull, a nighthawk, and the Bingo Master, moving between the extremes of white and black, hope and despair, comedy and tragedy, order and chaos, as well as between Native and White cultures. Because Nanabush participates in both cultures, elements of each may be accommodated, without a necessary mutual destruction. *The Rez Sisters* concludes with Philomena sitting like a queen on her 'spirit white' toilet throne, celebrating the black and white 'large, shining porcelain tiles' of her bathroom, and Pelajia back on her roof, still looking for the seagulls over Marie-Adele's house, unaware that Nanabush is right behind her, dancing 'to the beat of her hammer, merrily and triumphantly' in celebration of the strange inconsistencies and contradictions in individual lives.

*The Rez Sisters* begins at the house of 53-year-old Pelajia Patchnose, who is reshingling her roof with the amiable but inept assistance of her sister Philomena Moosetail. Pelajia is fed up with life in 'plain, dusty, boring old Wasaychigan Hill.' The only excitement in the lives of these women comes from the small-stakes bingo games in the local church and nearby towns; but even that pleasure has become stale, flat, and unprofitable to the melancholy Pelajia. However, the indolent August haze over these women begins to lift in the second scene, in the yard of their half-sister Marie-Adele Starblanket, when a rumour begins to circulate about The Biggest Bingo in the World coming to Toronto. This phrase is capitalized every time it occurs. Like a 'Wasy' version of Chicken Little, Marie-Adele's excitable sister Annie Cook leads the pursuit and confirmation of this rumour, collecting on the way another sister, Emily Dictionary; a sister-in-law, Veronique St. Pierre; and Veronique's mentally disabled adopted daughter, Zhaboonigan Peterson. After a slapstick argument among the group in the Wasy general store, all seven women march to the Band Office to demand funding for their trip to the bingo in Toronto. The first act ends with the unseen chief rejecting this oddball delegation. The second act opens with the women taking affirmative action on the matter. Collectively they have a wide range of skills, all of which they employ to raise the necessary \$1,400 for the trip: cleaning, harvesting, baking, recycling, entertaining, home maintenance, and entrepreneurial acumen are all put to use in a raucously funny 'fundraising' collage. In an accomplished display of dramatic pacing, Highway follows this frantic scene with a series of quiet, introspective encounters among the women as they drive their borrowed van through the night to Toronto. He then raises the play to a climax of tempo and energy with the bingo event itself. In the grand-prize game for \$500,000, The Biggest Bingo in the World disintegrates into more slapstick, with the Wasy women finally storming the podium and making off with the bingo machine. At the same time, the meaning of the game is raised to another level: Marie-Adele, sick with abdominal cancer, literally waltzes from this world to the next in the arms of the resplendent Bingo Master, moving peacefully into a spiritual realm while worldly chaos rages around her. Following this climax, back at

Wasaychigan Hill, we see the remaining “rez sisters” bury Marie-Adele, and we observe how the events of the play have changed their lives. While the plot is simple and linear, the play is not. Its complexity lies not in the plot, but in a sophisticated pattern of character revelation and development which entwines the plot. A reading of some of the women’s individual stories a character’s ‘through-line’ in theatrical terminology will help to demonstrate how the strength of the play depends on cyclical character journeys rather than on the plot line. Philomena’s story, for example, is a victory of simple needs and simple dreams. During the course of the play, she moves from contentment in the present, to despondency rooted in past sorrows, to return with greater contentment to concerns of the present. In the opening scene, while Pelajia wrestles with her existential angst, Philomena dreams only of winning ‘every bingo jackpot between here and Espanola that she might build for herself a new ultra-modern bathroom. This dream is evidently inspired by a bowel problem: her ‘sisters’ tease her about her frequency of visits to the toilet, and in the hubbub of the general store scene she adds her comments imperiously from a sitting position in the john.

Later in the play, however, we learn that Philomena’s bluff good cheer is to some extent an act of will. In the long drive in the van, she reveals that the date of The Biggest Bingo in the World holds special significance: it is the birthday of her lost child. Almost thirty years earlier, while working as a secretary in Toronto’s garment district, she had an affair with a married white man. After he broke it off, Philomena gave up her new-born baby for adoption without even learning if it was a boy or a girl. This revelation is a low point for Philomena, normally a cheerful caring busybody to her ‘rez sisters.’ But she is not the sort to stay low for very long. As it happens, she is the only one of the groups to win any money at the bingo in Toronto, and on her return, she uses her modest winnings to realize her worldly dream: a grand new bathroom with, as centrepiece, a large toilet, ‘spirit white ... so comfortable you could just sit on it right up until the day you die!’ Her other dream, that of finding her lost child, is forgotten. A key ingredient of Philomena’s contentment, apparently, is to choose attainable dreams.

The dreams of her sister Pelajia are much more difficult to fulfil. She is the natural leader of the group, a stern father-figure in coveralls brandishing her ever-present hammer. A sense of her own powerlessness and aimlessness in the community have brought on her current malaise, to the point where she wants to abandon this society and move to Toronto. For Pelajia, the huge prizes in The Biggest Bingo in the World re-animate her dream of paving the roads on the reserve, which would empower her leadership by demonstrating the wisdom of her proposals. Pelajia’s story is that of learning how to lead, of developing her latent talent into a positive force. She is at her weakest when she uses her hammer to threaten people, even if it is for their own good. She gains stature when she uses it constructively (shingling roofs in the fund-raising scene) or shares it with others allowing Emily to use it as a gavel in the trip-planning scene. When she dispenses with her hammer entirely, calming a terrified Marie-Adele in the darkened van, Pelajia demonstrates that she is truly a constructive



leader. Later, speaking at Marie-Adele's funeral, Pelajia shares some acquired wisdom with her sisters to help mitigate their grief: Marie-Adele made the most of her life while she was here, and now Pelajia promises to do the same. By the end of the play, Pelajia has accepted her own talent for leadership, and determines to use it to genuinely improve conditions on the reserve rather than just to complain about them. She is back on her roof where she began the play, but her hammer has become a badge of purpose rather than just a physical tool. The mainspring of the play is Marie-Adele, whose fear, suffering, and final ascension into the spirit world drive its events and character journeys. Marie-Adele does not love bingo for its own sake, as Annie and Philomena do, but for the dream which the grand prize might buy: an idyllic island home in Georgian Bay for her husband Eugene and their fourteen children. This dream is doomed, alas, pushed aside by Marie-Adele's growing concerns for her family in the event of her death. As if this worry were not hard enough, her illness is also driving a wedge between her and her beloved Eugene, as she confides to Pelajia on their way to Toronto: He does not talk, when something goes wrong with him, he does not talk, shuts me out, just disappears. Last night he did not come home. Again, it happened. ... I cannot even have him inside me anymore. It is still growing there. The cancer. Pelajia, een-pay-see-see-yan. Pelajia, I am scared to death.

The figure of Nanabush haunts Marie-Adele throughout the play. In fact, the terminally ill Marie-Adele and the feeble-minded Zhaboonigan are the only characters aware of Nanabush in his various guises. He first appears in Marie-Adele's yard as a white seagull, playfully threatening to foul her laundry and disconcerting her with his stares. Then, on the road to Toronto, Nanabush appears to her as a black nighthawk, driving her into hysterics with her fears for herself and her family. Marie-Adele is due to take further tests in Toronto, two days after the gigantic bingo there, but she does not live that long. As she waltzes with Nanabush in the guise of the Bingo Master, he begins to transform into the nighthawk, in effect an Ojibway angel of death. After having resisted for so long, in this scene Marie-Adele comes to accept her own death in the same way that she accepted life, gently and with love: 'Oh. It is you, so that is who you are. ... Come ... do not be afraid. ... Come to me ... ever soft wings.

The death of Marie-Adele creates regenerative ripples through most of the cast of characters. Up to this point, for example, Veronique St. Pierre has shown herself to be a small-minded gossip frustrated by her own childlessness. After Marie-Adele dies, Veronique breathes life into her own dream by moving into the Starblanket home to take care of Marie-Adele's family. The hard-working widower Eugene can provide all the things that Veronique's alcoholic husband cannot: a huge roast to cook, a good stove to cook it in, and a ready-made family that needs her love and care. The cycle is completed; and Veronique's small-mindedness, we finally understand, was a symptom not of having too little love to bestow, but rather of having too few people on whom to bestow it. Similarly, Emily Dictionary seems an unappealing character when we first meet her: a coarse, tough, foul-mouthed young woman recently come home to 'the rez' from California. On the trip to Toronto, however, we learn that



Emily's present hard-bitten persona may be just one stage in a long process of healing. Her former husband beat her viciously for ten years, and her lesbian lover in California committed suicide. The latent love in Emily is brought out by Marie-Adele's fear and by Zhaboonigan's fragility. So, is it, oddly, by Emily's current affair with Big Joey, Wasaychigan Hill's most notorious stud, for at the end of the play we learn that Emily is pregnant? A new life completes the cycle, to compensate somehow for the loss of Marie-Adele, as Emily is beautifully transformed into a loving sister to Zhaboonigan and a loving mother to her baby.

The plot of the play is simple and linear but the portrayal of characters revelation and depiction is complicated. The different personalities of each character in 'The Rez Sisters' interweave audience at different attitude towards their life and role on the reservation. The seven women's [Pelajia Patchnose, Philomena Moosetail, Marie-Adele Starblanket, Zhaboonigan Peterson, Veronique St. Pierre, Emily Dictionary, Annie Cook] arranged a road trip from their reserve to Toronto to participate in The Biggest Bingo in the World. Every human nature belongs to their own ambitions and fortunes. Likewise, each woman in the play has their own dreams and hopes in winning the Bingo jackpot and what life will bring changing fortunes in them. These characters displayed the natural desire to rise above their surroundings and create environment for their children and future generation. Although the reserve can be viewed as a place of misery, with little hope and wishes. Rez sisters has their own personal demons, tragedies and hopes that winning the Bingo game will be the answer to all their problems. The play opens with Pelajia who reveals her desire to escape from her disdainful life. The dreams of Pelajia are much more difficult to fertile, she uses a hammer to threaten people. At the end her hammer has become a badge of purpose rather than just a physical tool. Philomena's story is a victory of simple needs and simple dreams. Philomena dreams only of winning bingo, so that she can build a new toilet. It is later revealed that Philomena conceived a child after having an affair with her boss, who eventually abandoned her. Both she and her sister Pelajia remained trapped on the reserve. She is the only one who won some money at the bingo. The varied task of characters includes Marie Adele matriarch of the play who has fourteen children and her dreams of an idyllic Island home in Georgian Bay for her husband Eugene and children's. Later was diagnosed that she is a victim of cancer and it expresses her true fears to die. She optimistically believes that her husband will take care of her children's. Annie Cook, older sister of Marie Adele and half-sister of Pelajia and Phenomena, lost Eugene to her own sister Marie Adele. Annie has unrealistic hope of being a country singer and marry Fritz a Jewish country musician a dream that might be easier to accept if she could sing. Emily Dictionary sister of Annie is an unappealing character works in the local store and a rough ex-biker who lost her lesbian lover in a tragic motor cycle accident, although previously married with a husband who abused her and almost killed her. She offers conflict between the characters. At the end of the play Emily became pregnant and beautifully transferred as a loving sister to Zhaboonigan and

a loving mother to her baby. Veronique is sister-in-law of Emily Dictionary; she is disliked by almost everybody and has equal sources of distress in her life. She adopted Zhaboonigan (a mentally disabled daughter) with her husband and a predictable stove. At the end of the play, she gets new stove that she has been wanting. She uses it to cook for Eugene, widower of Marie-Adele, and his children. Zhaboonigan was sexually abused [screwdriver] by two white rapist and carries the brutal burden with herself. Nanabush is the only male character who is also known as trickster, who is a mythological spirit that observes the action of the play [. Zhaboonigan is the only one who can able to see Nanabush] The play recounts and overcome several diversions and obstacles of rez sisters on the way to Toronto. During their exchange of stories each character's emotional and personal sufferings have been heightened. The audience gets to know about these women, their stories and able to see how they treat each other. Even, when they argue and fight each other, they lookout for one another the bond of sisterhood transcends all racial labels and material objects. As the play comes to an end the audience came to know the major themes such as Nation with in a Nation, race and ethnicity, cultural limitations are clearly portrayed including home as a element where every human heart is.

Highway did a great job by giving the reader an idea of what reserve life is about. He gave us the opportunity to experience the hardship of native people and some insight to how they form their identity. Nanabush had a great deal to do with the women keeping their current identities. I feel that if we believe in a spirit and surrender or lives to them, they will take care of us just as Nanabush did in this play. As human beings we need to open our eyes and see we can all belong together and live in one society without dropping our culture that will end cultural limitations, race and ethnicity such stereotyping. These are the main factors that push people, more commonly native people, in to the loss of belongings, the loss of their culture and the loss of the core of their identity. *The Rez Sisters* makes the audience feel part of "an extraordinary, exuberant, life-affirming family." It is not a play about social problems, but about people and their dreams and their fears. That these people happen to be Native women, reflecting some of the problems of their particular place in contemporary society, asserts one feature only of the play's appeal. As Tomson Highway has observed, "I am sure some people went to Rez expecting crying and moaning and plenty of misery, reflecting everything they have heard about or witnessed on reserves. They must have been surprised. All that humour and love and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology." The oddity is that he should be so proud of avoiding negative responses in his first major play, when he provokes them so relentlessly in his second.

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## 10.6 Questions:

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1. Why is it significant that the play begins on a roof?
2. Philomena is fascinated with the fantasy of buying a new white toilet. This becomes an important motif in the play; why did Highway pick a toilet as the object of her dreams? What is the overall meaning inherent in this motif?
3. Why is Zhaboonigan's speech about getting sexually abused an important moment in the play?
4. What is the significance of the silence that occurs right after Annie says that they will be the only Indians at the Bingo game (p. 69)?
5. What are some examples of humour in the play?
6. Where do we see the collision of white and red cultures in the play?
7. Why can only Zhaboonigan and Marie-Adele see Nanabush?
8. What's the significance that the play ends the same way it began-- with Pelajia and Philomena up on the roof?
9. The very last note of the play is seeing Nanabush "landing" on Pelajia's roof, dancing to the beat of her hammer. What is the significance of this ending?
10. So how do we feel (where are we left) at the end of this play?

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