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MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

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Modern European Drama

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Ghosts Henrik Ibsen

P. K. Satapathy

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1.1 Introduction: Modern European Drama

Modern European drama developed in the transitional phase between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It marked a break from the theatre conventions of earlier periods. The radical changes to the theatre tradition were triggered by the rapid changes that were taking place in Europe during this period. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the upheavals of war, which collectively influenced the broader socio-political environment, contributed significantly to reshaping the contours of European Theatre. This was a significant departure from romantic idealism and formulaic plots of the 19th century theatre. Playwrights began to focus on everyday life and the struggles and moral dilemmas of ordinary individuals. However, if we must point out some specific factors that shaped the contours of modern European drama, then it must be the rise of two major and interrelated movements, realism and naturalism. They sought to depict life with greater accuracy and complexity than their predecessors. The realist movement, pioneered by figures such as Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov, sought to portray characters and



situations with psychological depth and authenticity, reflecting the multifaceted nature of human experience. Naturalism gave it a kind of scientific veneer. We will discuss these two related movements in some detail in a later section.

Ibsen, an important figure in this transition, ushered in a new kind of theatre that redefined theatre practice in significant ways. In terms of themes, Ibsen introduced hitherto taboo subjects like gender inequality, hereditary sin, and moral hypocrisy. His plays, such as *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, challenged social norms and engaged with contemporary debates about individual autonomy and social justice. In terms of technique, apart from the use of realist stage settings and everyday language, he refined the nascent realism of the Problem Plays by adding a layer of psychological realism in depicting his characters. Similarly, Anton Chekhov's work, including plays like *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vanya*, explored the subtleties of human relationships and the often-unspoken tensions within families and society. This was a new kind of theatre that had started looking inwards. The early 20th century saw the emergence of avant-garde and experimental approaches that further expanded the boundaries of theatrical expression. Playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett contributed to the development of new forms and techniques. Brecht's Epic Theatre introduced the concept of "alienation" or "distancing" that compelled the audience to be active participants rather than passive consumers of theatre. On the other hand, Samuel Beckett explored existential themes and the absurdity of human existence in plays like *Waiting for Godot*. The exploration of identity, memory, and the fragmentation of reality became central to the work of many playwrights.

Overall, modern European drama represents a dynamic and innovative chapter in the history of theatre. It explores the complexities of human existence and its engagement with contemporary social and philosophical issues. The diversity of theatre practices and thematic concerns made it an extremely vibrant and interesting period. In this paper you will get to sample a few Modern European plays. You will also get to know how this drama evolved under various circumstances and appreciate the rich variety of dramatic practices adopted by different dramatists. However, in this lesson we will only engage with the dramatic art of Ibsen who, as mentioned earlier, was a key figure in the development of Modern European drama.

1.2 Learning Objectives

After going through this lesson, you would be able to:

- ◆ Develop a critical understanding of nineteenth and twentieth-century European theatre.
- ◆ Understand the socio-cultural and political landscape that shaped Modern European drama.



- ◆ Appreciate the contemporary relevance of European drama in terms of its articulations of the issues of individual liberty, position of women, and issues of power and domination.
- ◆ Write a critical note on realism and naturalism in theatre.
- ◆ Appreciate how theatre serves as a medium to interrogate dominant cultural practices and enable social change.
- ◆ Write critical notes on various aspects of Ibsen's play *Ghosts*.

1.3 Ibsen: Brief Biographical Notes

Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828, in Skien, a small port town in Norway. The Ibsen family initially lived in relative prosperity, but when Henrik was seven years old, his father's business failed, leading to financial ruin. The family moved to a smaller, more isolated house in the countryside. This period of financial hardship had a profound impact on Ibsen's outlook and future writing. As a child, Ibsen was shy and introverted. He later described his childhood as lonely and marked by a sense of exclusion. Due to financial troubles Ibsen left home and moved to Grimstad, a small coastal town, where he worked as an apprentice pharmacist. During this time, he fathered an illegitimate child with a servant named Else Sophie Jensdatter. The child, a boy named Hans Jacob Henriksen, was born in 1846. Although Ibsen acknowledged the boy and supported him financially, he had little direct contact with him. This early episode of fatherhood and the resulting social stigma might have influenced his complex portrayals of family dynamics and hidden moral transgressions in his later plays.

Ibsen spent six years in Grimstad, where he began to study for his university entrance exams. It was during this period that he developed an interest in literature, theatre, and history, and he began writing his first plays. However, his initial attempts to pass the university exams were unsuccessful, and he never completed his formal education. In 1850, Ibsen moved to Christiania (now Oslo) to pursue a career in the arts. His first play, *Catiline*, was published the same year. Though it garnered little attention, it set him off on his journey as a dramatist. Ibsen's financial struggles, however, were hardly over. He tried to support himself by writing for newspapers and doing various other odd jobs with very little success. But he remained committed to writing plays despite repeated failures to find acceptance. Finally, when he found a job as theatre director at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen in 1851, he had some financial stability. The six years that he spent writing and directing plays at Bergen gave him valuable experience in stagecraft. Ibsen,



during this period, produced and directed a large number of plays, honing his skills both as a playwright and a stage manager. In 1858, Ibsen married Suzannah Thoresen, the daughter of a well-known Norwegian clergyman and writer. Suzannah was a strong-willed woman who shared Ibsen's passion for literature. Their marriage was based on mutual respect and intellectual companionship. However, it was not without its difficulties. The couple had one son, Sigurd Ibsen, born in 1859, who later became a prominent political figure and served as the Norwegian prime minister in Stockholm from 1903 to 1905. Ibsen's relationship with his son was often strained because Sigurd did not follow in his intellectual footsteps. The complexity of the parental roles that Ibsen often explored in his plays is perhaps a reflection of his own distant and sometimes authoritarian attitude toward his own family.

Ibsen and Suzannah spent significant periods of time apart. Between 1864 and 1891, Ibsen lived in Italy and Germany, while Suzannah managed their household and raised their son under not so helpful circumstances. This separation from family and the distance from his home country had its impact on his literary career as well as his family relationships in contrasting ways. Suzannah took on most of the parenting responsibilities. Ibsen had high expectations from Sigurd and was a distant father, not very different from the detached male figures found in many of his plays. Suzannah's role in managing the family and supporting Ibsen's career was crucial. But Ibsen's reserved, introverted nature, combined with long periods of separation due to his travels created some emotional distance between them. That, however, did not hinder Ibsen's growth as a dramatist. On the contrary, the distance from family and home gave Ibsen the requisite critical distance to deal with Norwegian society and social relationship with a fair degree of detachment in his plays.

After 27 long years in Europe and a successful literary career, Ibsen returned to Christiania (Oslo) in 1891. His later years were spent in relative comfort. He continued to write plays until his health began to decline. In 1900, Ibsen suffered a series of strokes that left him partially paralyzed and unable to write. His public appearances became rare, and he spent the last six years of his life in poor health, largely confined to his home. In all these later years, Suzannah remained his steadfast companion and cared for him till his death on May 23, 1906, in Christiania. Henrik Ibsen's personal life was as complex and layered as the characters in his plays.

1.4 Ibsen the Dramatist

Ibsen had an interesting career in the theatre which can be roughly seen as; a) an early romantic phase followed by, b) mature social realism and c) the late symbolist phase. He



worked as the artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania (now Oslo), where he continued to experiment with drama and directed other writers' works. Norwegian Theatre at the time, focused on themes of historical grandeur, mythology, and national identity, which resonated with the growing sense of Norwegian independence. Ibsen was, naturally, drawn to these themes and ideas. He wrote *Catiline*, his first play, when he was just 22. Not surprisingly, this play reflects his youthful interest in classical history and political rebellion. Set in ancient Rome, the play takes us back in history to explore themes of personal ambition, political intrigue, and revolution through the character of a Roman senator Catiline who attempted to overthrow the Roman Republic. There was nothing new in the play in so far as the structure, dialogues, and the theme. It failed to garner both popular as well as critical interest. What is noteworthy though is the fact that it did indicate the direction Ibsen was travelling. From this early play we can already see that Ibsen was interested in exploring socio-political issues and the issue of social morality. The plays that followed like *The Burial Mound* (1850) followed, more or less the same pattern with a progressive focus on the question of national identity and women's issues. We can regard this early period as essentially a period of experimentation and a search for a distinct theater. Though Ibsen was making some progress, it wasn't enough.

Ibsen was quite frustrated with the lack of success in theatre, both in terms of critical appreciation and popular acceptance. Though he continued to work hard at his art he was unhappy. To compound the problem further he felt hemmed in by the conservative cultural values of Norwegian society that allowed him very little creative freedom. He was progressively growing critical of this backward-looking Norwegian society and culture. All these factors forced him to shift base away from Norway. Finally, he left Norway in 1864 in search of that elusive success. After leaving Norway, he primarily lived in Italy and Germany. The financial support of friends, along with state grants from Norway, enabled him to write without the pressure of supporting himself through other work. This move marked a turning point in his career. He could now break away from the historical dramas and romanticized narratives of his early works and begin exploring the social and psychological realism for which he would, later, become famous.

Peer Gynt (1867) could be considered as Ibsen's first major work. This play was, essentially, a poetic and symbolic exploration of Norwegian identity, folklore, and fantasy. His early works had helped him develop some command over dramatic form, stagecraft, and character development. Though he preferred the verse form and generally followed the romantic play format, this play marked a transition in his theatre style from romanticism to a more structured realism. The play is still thematically rooted in the Norwegian myths, culture and landscapes but its form and language are largely experimental. The play's mix



of verse and prose, its fluid shifts between reality and fantasy add a new dimension to Ibsen's play writing. *Peer Gynt* may not be as realistic in its narrative style as his later plays, but the character's psychological journey anticipates the more focused social and personal struggles of his later plays. Though Ibsen's work moved toward a sharper, more realistic critique of society, many of the existential themes in *Peer Gynt* remained central to his concerns as a playwright in later years.

When Ibsen tasted success with *Peer Gynt*, he was almost forty years old. It took him another twelve years to shake off the baggage of Norwegian myth, nationalism and the romantic play format to arrive at a completely different kind of play with *A Doll's House* (1879). It was a path breaking play both in its subject matter and its treatment, and it created a stir because it foregrounded the issues of gender roles, marriage, personal freedom, and challenged the traditional conservative social norms of the late 19th century. The ending of the play, where Nora Helmer decides to leave her husband and children to find her own identity, was both shocking and controversial, especially in a society that expected the women to adhere to their roles as devoted wives and mothers. The publication of this play was indeed significant not just for Ibsen but also for contemporary theatre. The period, spanning roughly from the late 1870s to the 1890s, marks the maturing of Ibsen into a playwright, with a deep focus on realism, social critique, and psychological depth. It was during this time that Ibsen established himself as a key figure in the development of modern drama.

A Doll's House was followed in quick succession by a series of plays that explored various social issues in a realistic/naturalistic way. In *Ghosts* (1881), Ibsen explores the destructive consequences of social hypocrisy and moral repression, particularly through the themes of inherited guilt, venereal disease, and the corrosive effects of maintaining public facades. Since this play will be discussed in detail later, we will just make a passing remark that at the time of its publication it was a scandal for addressing taboo subjects and remains one of his most controversial plays. His next play, *An Enemy of the People* (1882), explores the conflict between individual morality and the will of the majority. It portrays the ethical struggle of a doctor who exposes a public health issue in his town's spa, only to be ostracized by the community. The play delves into the themes of truth, integrity, and the dangers of populism. By the late 1880's, Ibsen's interest was shifting from the outer world into the inner conflicts of human beings, especially the psychological and existential dilemmas that go beyond social critique. *The Wild Duck* (1884) explores the tension between idealism and reality; the wild duck itself serves as a symbol of wounded, fragile lives. The play moves towards Ibsen's interest in how truth can be destructive. *Hedda Gabler* (1890) focuses on a powerful and deeply troubled protagonist,



Hedda, who feels trapped by society's expectations and her own desires for control and influence. Hedda's manipulation of those around her reveal themes of power, freedom, and existential despair. As his themes went through various transitions, so did his technique. Realism, that had served him well while dealing with social issues, would not allow him to delve into the mysteries of the human condition and its complexities. So, he started resorting to generous doses of complex symbolism in his later plays.

Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891. During his time away from home, he achieved fame and acceptance as one of the most influential playwrights of his era. The decision to return home was perhaps influenced by, a) the growing recognition at home and b) his declining health and the need for stability. Back at home, he had hoped for some sense of peace in his later years. But he suffered a series of strokes in 1890, which significantly affected his ability to write and work. Though he remained active on the social circuit, declining health drove Ibsen to delve deeper into the inner life of the mind rather than the external social realities. This change can be seen in the increasingly symbolic nature of his characters and settings of his later plays. This change of direction towards an introspective, psychological drama is seen in plays like *The Master Builder* (1892) and the plays that follow. Themes like guilt, ambition, existential dread come to dominate his later plays. The characters in these plays wrestle with personal demons, guilt, ambition, and existential crises. They are often on a quest for self-fulfillment or trapped in conflicting desires between duty and personal freedom.

When We Dead Awaken (1899) is Ibsen's last play. This play is often seen as a reflection on his own life and career as an artist. The central character, Arnold Rubek, is an aging sculptor who encounters Irene, a former muse who feels that Rubek "killed" her spirit to create his greatest work. Both characters grapple with regrets over their past decisions, particularly the sacrifices they made for the sake of art. The play reflects Ibsen's deeper concern with the spiritual emptiness that can result from single-minded ambition. By adopting symbolism in his later plays, Ibsen was able to push the boundaries of theatre and shape the trajectory of modern drama.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) How is Modern European Drama different from earlier dramatic practices?
- ii) What were the circumstances under which Ibsen started working in the theatre?
- iii) Why did Ibsen leave Norway in 1864 and how did it affect his career as a dramatist?
- iv) We can see three different phases in Ibsen's growth as a dramatist. What are these three phases?



1.5 Ghosts: A Critical Summary

Though controversial at the time of its publication, *Ghosts* remains one of Ibsen's most important and influential works that continues to provoke thought and debate on the nature of human responsibility, freedom, and the oppressive power of social norms. What we are going to do in this section is to try and present a critical summary of the play. So, apart from providing a bare outline of the plot and important events in the play, we will try and provide some critical reflections on them. You are, however, advised to read the play in detail and not treat this summary as a substitute for the actual text.

1.5.1 Act I: Critical Summary

Ghosts is a play in three acts with a linear plot structure that gradually unveils layers of truth, and invites the audience to engage with issues like moral ambiguity, restrictive social system, inherited sin, personal ambition, and gender roles. The first Act of a play, as you already know, is expected to lay the groundwork for the play's central themes, characters, and conflicts. The first Act also establishes the psychological and moral landscape in which the drama will unfold. As you will see, Act I of *Ghosts* manages to achieve all these objectives remarkably well. *Ghosts* opens in the parlour of Mrs. Helene Alving's home. She is preparing for the opening of an orphanage built in memory of her late husband, Captain Alving. Several key characters are introduced at this stage, and the stage is set for conflicts that will unfold later in the play. The play opens with a conversation between Regina Engstrand, Mrs. Alving's maid, and her father Jakob Engstrand, a carpenter. Engstrand tries to convince Regina to leave the Alving household and work at a sailors' establishment he is building. Regina resists, as she wants to stay in Mrs. Alving's household, where she feels she has a chance for a better life:

Regina: We'll see, all right! What, me? When I've been brought up by a lady like Mrs. Alving? - treated almost like one of the family here? Me go back with you - to a place like that? Tcha!

(Act I: 23)¹.

Engstrand's manipulations to get Regina back and her desire to escape the lower-class life sets up a subplot related to ambition and deception. Act I prepares the audience for the unfolding of the play's major themes. It sets the stage for the unraveling of family secrets, introducing key characters who represent contrasting worldviews. The central tensions between social expectations and personal truth are slowly revealed through subtle exchanges preparing the audience for the deeper revelations to come later. As you must have noticed,

1. All references to the play are from Henrik Ibsen. *Ghosts and Other Plays*. Translated by Peter Watts, Penguin, 1964.



the orphanage plays a dual symbolic role in the narrative. On the surface, it is a charitable institution meant to honour Captain Alving's legacy and provide care for orphaned children. However, for Mrs. Alving, it is also a way to rid herself of her late husband's tainted wealth. By dedicating Captain Alving's money to the orphanage, she hopes to cleanse herself of the painful memories and moral burden of his immoral life. The orphanage, therefore, represents a kind of moral facade; a way for Mrs. Alving to suppress and hide the truth of her husband's debauchery, from society. It seems that society values respectable appearance over uncomfortable truths under a veneer of respectability, a theme that Ibsen explores in the play. At the same time, it foreshadows the inevitable failure of such repression, as the past refuses to remain buried.

As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Mrs. Alving is not merely a dutiful widow who wants to preserve her husband's memory. Her conversation with Pastor Manders reveals the depth of her dissatisfaction with the social expectations that have shaped her life. She tells Manders the truth about her husband:

Mrs. Alving: Now, Mr Manders, I'm going to tell you the truth. I'd promised myself that you should hear it one day...and no one but you.

Pastor Manders: What is the truth?

Mrs. Alving: The truth is this: that my husband was just as dissolute when he died as he had been all his life. (Act I:49)

Years ago, she tried to escape her unhappy marriage by fleeing to Manders, but he convinced her to return to Captain Alving, citing her duty as a wife. We see the oppressive power of religious and social norms that forces women like Mrs. Alving into subservient roles, denying them agency over their own lives. She had to obey Manders and returned to her husband, but at a great personal cost. Consequently, with the passage of time, Mrs. Alving develops a more critical view of these conventional values. She is now openly skeptical of Manders' conservative moralization, and her views on marriage, duty, and individual freedom are more progressive. However, she hasn't been able to break free of the same social expectations that have always dominated her life. This failure is reflected in her decision to construct the orphanage in her husband's name, a decision motivated by her need to keep up appearances. Pastor Manders is shocked by Mrs. Alving's admissions and critical views. He is the voice of society, upholding rigid standards of duty, respectability, and religious morality and ever so willing to sacrifice the truth of people's lives to preserve a 'good reputation'. This tension between Mrs. Alving's evolving perspective and Manders' rigid conservatism is one of the central conflicts of the play: the clash between the individual's desire for truth and freedom, and the repressive forces of social convention.



Oswald Alving, Mrs. Alving's son, returns home after living for many years abroad in Paris, where he was pursuing a career as an artist. His return is filled with a sense of foreboding. From the outset, Oswald appears physically and emotionally weak, casting a shadow over what should be a joyful reunion. His illness becomes symbolic of the play's central theme of heredity, particularly the transmission of moral and physical degradation from one generation to the next. Oswald is unaware of his father's true nature, having grown up with an idealized image of him. Mrs. Alving sent Oswald away at a young age to shield him from the corrupting influence of his father's immoral behavior. However, despite her efforts, Oswald has inherited more than just his father's name; he has inherited a debilitating illness (which the audience later learns is syphilis), a direct result of Captain Alving's debauchery. This idea of inherited sin is central to Ibsen's critique of the hypocrisy within social structures. No matter how hard Mrs. Alving tries to escape her husband's legacy, it continues to haunt her and her son, a reminder that the sins of the past have real and lasting consequences. Oswald's artistic, bohemian lifestyle and his liberal ideas contrast sharply with the conservative values of Pastor Manders. The generational divide between Oswald and the older characters further accentuates the tension between new, progressive ideals and the traditional moral framework that characters like Manders defend. Oswald's perspective on life and morality is more aligned with modern, cosmopolitan views and his return from Paris symbolizes a confrontation between the repressive social values of the past and the freer, more liberated attitudes of the present.

The sub-plot involving Jacob Engstrand, and his daughter Regina adds another layer of moral complexity to the narrative. Engstrand is a carpenter who presents himself as a repentant sinner, eager to open a "home for sailors" as a means of making amends for his past wrongdoings. However, Engstrand is a manipulative and self-serving character, using religious language and piety as a cover for his selfish ambitions. He tries to convince Regina, who works as Mrs. Alving's maid, to come with him and work at the sailors' home not because he wants his daughter at home but rather to have a young woman work as a hostess and entertain sailors. But she resists, because she aspires to a higher social standing. Later, Regina would realise the futility of her aspirations when she learns that Engstrand is not her real father and that she is the illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving. That makes her Oswald's half-sister. That, unfortunately, is the end of any possible romantic relationship that she might have imagined with Oswald. Her ambition to rise above her station through a romantic liaison with Oswald reflects the limitations placed on women in a patriarchal society, where marriage is often seen as the only means of social mobility. At the same time, her character embodies the theme of concealed truths, as her true parentage is one of the many secrets that will eventually come to light, fur-



ther complicating the relationships between the characters. Engstrand's hypocrisy mirrors the hypocrisy of society at large, where appearances and public morality often mask personal ambition and deceit. He manipulates Pastor Manders by appealing to his sense of charity and religious duty. But the reality is different, and the audience can see through his facade. However, Engstrand's scheming is only but a reflection of the moral double standards that is prevalent in society.

We can say that Act I prepares the groundwork for the tragic events that will unfold in the later acts. The "ghosts" that Mrs. Alving refers to at the end of Act I, are already present, though they have not yet fully revealed themselves. Act I is rich in foreshadowing, particularly in the way Mrs. Alving speaks of her husband's sins and the orphanage's significance. The audience senses that these buried secrets will soon come to the surface, threatening to destroy the carefully constructed lives of the characters. Oswald's illness and Regina's ambiguous status hint at the tragic consequences of the sins of the previous generation. The Act ends with Mrs. Alving accidentally overhearing, what appears to be an intimate exchange between Regina and Oswald in the dining room. When Pastor Manders enquires about what was happening, she replies:

Pastor manders (Upset): What's happening? Mrs Alving - what is it?

Mrs. Alving (hoarsely): "Ghosts! The couple in the conservatory - walking again. (Act I :54).

She expresses her belief that the sins of the past, particularly her husband's immoral actions, still haunt the present, suggesting that the "ghosts" of the past are not easily buried. Act I of *Ghosts* sets the stage for the disintegration of the Alving family's carefully maintained image of respectability. Mrs. Alving's struggle to reconcile her desire for truth with the pressures of social convention, Oswald's impending illness, and the lurking secrets of Captain Alving's past create a mood of growing unease. The act raises fundamental questions about moral responsibility, inherited guilt, and the impossibility of escaping the consequences of one's past.

Summary of Key Events:

- ◆ **Regina and Engstrand's conversation:** Engstrand tries to manipulate Regina into joining him in his shady business venture, but she refuses.
- ◆ **Pastor Manders' arrival:** He and Mrs. Alving discuss the orphanage's opening and revisit her troubled marriage to Captain Alving. They also discuss the issue of insurance for the Orphanage. Manders rejects the idea because insuring the Orphanage would give the impression that they did not trust in 'Divine Providence'.



- ◆ **Mrs. Alving reveals her husband's true nature:** She explains how her late husband's moral failings were hidden from society, and how Manders' advice had once forced her back into a toxic marriage.
- ◆ **Oswald's return:** Oswald, who was living as an artist in Paris returns. What should have become a joyous event is offset by a mysterious health problem that Oswald brings back with him.
- ◆ **The discussion of moral issues:** While Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders debate social morality the situation takes a turn with Mrs Alving overhearing a conversation between Oswald and Regina. This strengthens Mrs. Alving belief that the ghosts of the past sins continue to haunt the present.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Who are the key characters introduced in Act I?
- ii) What is the importance of Act I in Ghosts?
- iii) What does the Orphanage symbolize?
- iv) What are the major themes introduced in Act I?
- v) What is Mrs. Alving referring to when she says, "Ghosts! The couple in the conservatory - walking again."?

1.5.2 Act II: Critical Summary

In Act II, the action deepens further as Ibsen gradually develops the central themes of the play. This act serves as the turning point where the internal conflicts of the characters come to the fore, and the facade of respectability that Mrs. Alving has worked so hard to maintain begins to crumble under the weight of past sins and hidden truths.

At the start of the act, Mrs. Alving confesses to Pastor Manders about the reality of her marriage to Captain Alving. She reveals that Captain Alving, a highly respected member of the community, is the father of Regina. This is an unsettling revelation that Pastor Manders finds hard to believe or at least pretends to do so:

Pastor Manders: To her – Oh, but Engstrand isn't... Good heavens, Mrs Alving, that can't be true. There must be some mistake.

Mrs. Alving: There's no mistake at all. I'm afraid. Johanna had to confess the whole thing to me, and my husband couldn't deny it. So the only thing to do was to hush it up. (Act II:56)

This is a truth that Mrs. Alving had hidden for years, to protect her son Oswald, and to conform to social norms. She keeps Oswald away from the truth because it is expected



that a son must grow up to love and respect his father. Mrs. Alving's confession is particularly important because it exposes the moral hypocrisy at the heart of the play. Society holds up Captain Alving as a paragon of virtue, despite his immoral behavior, simply because outward appearances were maintained. Mrs. Alving's decision to build an orphanage in his name is part of this attempt to erase any possibility of his sins from surfacing in public, thereby insulating Captain Alving's reputation forever. However, she admits that the building of the orphanage is also her way of freeing herself from the past. By giving away Captain Alving's wealth, she hopes to close the chapter of his corrupting influence.

Manders, who had preached about a wife's duty to her husband and forced Mrs. Alving to suppress her desire for independence, and sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of appearances, is shocked by Mrs. Alving's revelations. But instead of condemning Captain Alving's debauchery, he tries to sweep it under the carpet by passing it off as youthful indiscretions. His response reflects his belief in the importance of maintaining appearances at all costs and reveals his inability to recognize the real harm that social expectations can cause. Manders disagrees with Mrs. Alving's desire to be truthful with Oswald. He thinks it is proper for Oswald to continue believing in the myth of his father's respectability.

Mrs. Alving (Looking fixedly at him): If I were the woman I ought to be, I should take Oswald on one side and say: 'Listen, my boy, your father was a dissolute man-'

Pastor Manders: Heaven forbid!

...

Pastor Manders: Do you call it cowardice to do your plain duty? Have you forgotten that a child should love and honour his father and mother?

...

Mrs. Alving: Yes, thanks to my regard for duty, I've been lying to my boy for years on end. What a coward - what a coward I've been! (Act II: 59)

For Manders, protecting the family's reputation is more important than confronting uncomfortable truths. This interaction between Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders highlights the hollowness of institutionalized morality. Manders remains blind to the harm that this hypocrisy inflicts on individuals, especially women like Mrs. Alving, who are forced to conform to these social rules at great personal cost.

A key theme in Act II is heredity, particularly as it relates to the transmission of sin from one generation to the next. At the end, Mrs. Alving's efforts to shield Oswald from his father's corrupting influence are futile. The true horror of Captain Alving's legacy is revealed through Oswald's illness, which is a result of the syphilis he has inherited from



his father. In this sense, Oswald becomes the literal and metaphorical embodiment of Captain Alving's sins. Oswald's condition is a tragic manifestation of the theme of genetic determinism; the idea that the consequences of one generation's sins is passed down to the next through bloodlines.

Oswald: At last he said: 'You have been more or less riddled from your birth.' The actual word he used was 'vermoulu'.

Mrs. Alving (anxiously) What did he mean by that?

Oswald: I didn't understand either, and I asked him to explain. Then the old cynic said- (He clenches his fists.) Oh...!

Mrs. Alving: What did he say?

Oswald: He said, 'The sins of the fathers are visited on the children....'

Mrs. Alving: The sins of the fathers-! (Act II:74)

Mrs. Alving had hoped that distance would protect Oswald from his father's immoral influence. But now she is forced to confront the fact that heredity is an inescapable force. Oswald's illness represents not only the physical consequences of his father's promiscuity but also the moral and psychological burden that he carries as a part of his family legacy. Ibsen emphasizes the tragic inevitability of this hereditary transmission of guilt and suffering.

Another character who plays a significant role in Act II is Engstrand, the carpenter who is supposedly Regina's father. Engstrand's appearance in this act adds to the play's critique of moral hypocrisy. He pretends to be a repentant sinner who wants to atone his past mistakes by building a sailors' home. Engstrand's offer is a ploy to manipulate Manders. And he is able to do that by using religious and moral language that appeals to Manders' social and religious conservatism. Engstrand's claim that he acted out of compassion in raising Regina is simply not true. Pure self-interest and the possibility of reaping some future dividends is what motivated Engstrand to take the blame. He seeks Manders' approval and financial support for his scheme, but the audience is aware that his motivations are far from pure. Engstrand's character represents the type of moral duplicity that permeates society; people who use the appearance of virtue to hide their true, self-serving nature.

The orphanage that Mrs. Alving funds in her late husband's name serves as a powerful symbol in the play. It represents Mrs. Alving's attempt to atone for the past and to rid herself of Captain Alving's corrupting influence. However, the orphanage also embodies the social tendency to cover up unpleasant truths with superficial gestures of charity and



respectability. The eventual burning down of the orphanage foreshadows the collapse of the false narratives that Mrs. Alving constructed around her husband's legacy. The fire symbolizes the inevitability of truth coming to light, despite attempts to suppress it.

The title '*Ghosts*' holds the key to the thematic core of Act II. Mrs. Alving reflects on how she and the others in the play are haunted by the "ghosts" of the past. As she says: *I'm haunted by ghosts...But I'm inclined to think that we're all ghosts, Pastor Manders; it's not only the things that we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs, and things of that sort. They're not actually alive in us, but they're rooted there all the same, and we can't rid ourselves of them.... And we are, all of us, afraid of the light.* (Act II: 61)

This statement reveals that the past exerts a powerful influence over the present, especially through the inherited consequences of sin and moral failure. Interestingly, as you must have noticed, the play begins on a cold, rainy and dark day. In fact, the dark and brooding weather reflects the mood of the play. In this context, Oswald's yearning for the sun is symbolic of the desire to break free of the ghosts of the past. Act II not only unravels the various hidden family secrets but also sets up the tragic trajectory of the characters' lives, particularly Oswald, who is doomed to suffer the consequences of his father's sins despite Mrs. Alving's desperate attempts to protect him. Ibsen's use of symbolism, particularly the orphanage and the idea of "ghosts," reinforces the notion that the past cannot be buried or ignored. It continues to haunt the present and destroy the lives of those who try to suppress it. It can only be dispelled by the sun, or in other words, the truth.

Summary of Key Events:

- ◆ **Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders that Regina is Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter:** The Act opens with the revelation that Captain Alving is the real father of Regina. Mrs. Alving kept it a secret to maintain appearances and to give Regina a better life. Though Pastor Manders seems to have had an inkling about this truth he struggles to accept it. Further, he tries to defend the Captain on dubious grounds.
- ◆ **Tension between social norms and personal truth is heightened:** Pastor Manders is appalled by Mrs. Alving's revelations. He insists that Mrs. Alving should continue hiding the truth to preserve Captain Alving's respectable image.
- ◆ **Mrs. Alving begins to realize the full impact of heredity:** Mrs. Alving grapples with the idea that Oswald's illness is the result of his father's sins. She confronts the devastating reality that heredity, both moral and physical, is inescapable.



- ◆ **Jacob Engstrand manipulates Pastor Manders:** Pastor Manders confronts Engstrand with the truth of Regina's status. He accuses Engstrand of being untruthful and immoral. But Engstrand turns the tables on Pastor Manders by pretending to be a morally upright man and being a good father to Regina and a good husband to her mother. He is able to convince Pastor Manders to support his plan to open a sailors' home. Engstrand uses the guise of piety and charity to deceive Manders.
- ◆ **Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders discuss the past:** Mrs. Alving reveals more about the true nature of her late husband, Captain Alving, who led a life of debauchery. She explains her long-standing decision to hide his immoral behavior from the public to protect the family's reputation.
- ◆ **Oswald reveals his worsening illness:** Mrs. Alving is deeply concerned about her son Oswald's declining health. Oswald explains that he suffers from a mysterious illness (later revealed as syphilis), which, he was told by the doctor, is inherited from his father's immoral lifestyle. He refuses to believe the doctor, blaming his own lifestyle instead. Oswald expresses despair and hints at a bleak future. This will later lead to catastrophic consequences.
- ◆ **Oswald talks about the Joy of Living:** Oswald tells her mother that he can't stay at home with her because it was gloomy. The gloominess is both literally and metaphorically true. There is no joy of living at home because there is nothing to do. He believes that his own salvation lay with Regina who is full of the joy of living. He is not yet aware of the fact that Regina is his half-sister, and he expresses the desire to have her as his wife.
- ◆ **The Act ends with the news of fire at the Orphanage:** As the weight of hidden truths becomes unbearable, Mrs. Alving faces the tragic consequences of the choices made in the past. The problem is compounded further by the fact that the Orphanage is now on fire. The tension mounts, setting the stage for the emotional and physical collapse that will follow in the final act.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) How does Engstrand convince Pastor Manders to support his plan for a 'sailors' home'?
- ii) What does Mrs. Alving reveal about Regina in this Act and what was Pastor Manders response?
- iii) What is Oswald suffering from?
- iv) Why is Pastor Manders reluctant to insure the Orphanage?



1.5.3 Act III: Critical Summary

In Act III, the emotional and thematic tensions that have been simmering throughout the play reach their devastating conclusion. The act presents the inescapable consequences of hidden sins, hereditary guilt, and the moral decay festering beneath the facade of social respectability. All these elements are tied together at the end. The act opens after the orphanage has burned down. This fire is not just a literal event. It signals the collapse of the false world that Mrs. Alving was living in. In terms of dramatic action, the movement now turns inward. This is a very short act where most of the characters exit the scene leaving only the mother and son together at the end.

The orphanage, built on a foundation of lies and denial, could not endure, much like the respectability Mrs. Alving had tried to maintain. The fire breaks out after some wood shavings catch fire. The actual source of the fire is not revealed leaving enough scope for wild speculation. Pastor Manders is horrified at the fire but is quick to attribute it to the wickedness of the house. He takes the high moral ground to condemn Mrs. Alving and Osvalds modern ideas. He refuses to see the fire as symbolic of the deeper issues lurking beneath the surface, clinging instead to his rigid sense of morality. In contrast, Mrs. Alving, who has already begun to question traditional values, does not share his view. She sees the fire at the Orphanage for what it is: the destruction of a false image that could no longer be sustained. This incident also has a darker side. The entire exchange between Manders and Engstrand about the fire exposes the underbelly of society.

Pastor Manders: Yes, but my dear fellow, how-?

Engstrand: Jakob Engstrand is like a guardian angel, sir, that's what he is.

Pastor Manders: No no, I certainly couldn't allow that.

Engstrand: Ah, you will in the end. Someone I know has taken the blame for another man once before.

Pastor Manders: Jakob! (Grasping his hand) You're a man in a thousand! Well, you shall have help with your Seaman's Refuse - you can rely on that. (Act III: 89)

Engstrand finds in the fire an opportunity to blackmail Manders into supporting his lodging house for sailors. He has very little difficulty in convincing Manders that the fire was a consequence of Manders own carelessness. However, he manages to strike a deal with Manders. He is ready to take the blame for Manders mistake, just as he did for Captain Alving, in exchange for Manders support for Engstrand's plans of setting up a home for sailors. Ironically, Engstrand promises to name the establishment after Captain Alving. This exchange is a sharp indictment of the hypocrisy on both sides, the layman



and the clergy. If Engstrand's scheming immorality deserves to be condemned so does the moral bankruptcy of Pastor Manders.

As the act progresses, Oswald confesses to his mother the full extent of his illness. He is suffering from syphilitic paralysis, a degenerative condition. Oswald describes the terror he feels at the prospect of losing control of his mind and body. His words are filled with foreboding, and he reveals that the disease has already begun to affect his mental faculties, leading to periods of confusion and forgetfulness. This revelation is the culmination of the theme of hereditary guilt that is threaded through the play. Oswald's illness embodies the idea that sins are passed down from one generation to the next. Mrs. Alving's attempts to shield her son ultimately fail. The "ghosts" of the past manifest physically in Oswald's disease.

Oswald's illness is also symbolic of the broader moral decay that haunts the Alving family. While Captain Alving's legacy has infected Oswald's body, the lies and deceptions surrounding the family have poisoned their lives. The inevitability of Oswald's end is a cruel reminder that, no matter what, the past has a way of catching up with the present. At this point Oswald is full of self-loathing and is vulnerable. Mrs Alving decides to reveal the truth about the father to the son hoping that the truth will lessen Oswald's burden. In this confession, Ibsen deftly shifts the blame away from an individual to the oppressive social conventions that emaciate men and women from within. Captain Alving, according to Mrs Alving, was not entirely to blame for the sorry state of affairs that they find themselves in now. It was the constrictive and joyless morality of everyday living that led him down the path of dissolution and that she herself was of little help.

Mrs. Alving: And then this boy, so full of the joy of living...had to live here in a second-rate town where there were no pleasures, but only dissipations. He had no aim in life, only an official position. He had no work that he could throw himself into heart and soul, only routine. Not a single one of his friends knew what the joy of living really meant - they were just idlers and toppers...

Oswald: Mother:

Mrs. Alving: And so the inevitable happened.

Oswald: The inevitable?

Mrs. Alving: You said yourself this evening what would happen to you if you stayed at home.

Oswald: Do you mean to say that my father...?

Mrs. Alving: Your poor father could never find any outlet for this overwhelming joy of living that was in him. And I didn't bring any sunshine into his life either. (Act III:92)



This revelation couldn't have come at a worse time for Oswald and Regina. They both had been planning on a life together though for different reasons. For Regina, Oswald was that magic door that would let her into the world of high society, way above her current station in life. For Oswald, aware as he is about his debilitating condition, Regina provided the hope for escape when the time came for it. Both are left devastated. Regina, instead of sticking around to tend to a sick Oswald, decides to leave with whatever she could salvage from her wasted time at the Alving house. While Regina's departure can be seen as a selfish attempt to carve out a future for herself, it is nothing but a pragmatic step to escape from the entanglements of the Alving household. Regina's exit highlights the precarious condition that women in general and women from the lower strata in particular, find themselves in. Regina, like Mrs. Alving, has been trapped by circumstances beyond her control, and her departure is both a rejection of the family's moral corruption and an acknowledgment of her own limited options in a society that offers little freedom to women of her class.

Following Regina's departure, the atmosphere shifts dramatically. A palpable urgency resonates in Oswald's voice, while Mrs. Alving exhibits a poignant sense of helplessness. In one of the most heart-wrenching moments of the play, Oswald implores his mother to assist him in dying when the disease reaches its terminal phase. He confides that he has brought a packet of morphine with him, expressing a desire for her to administer it when he can no longer care for himself. This request thrusts Mrs. Alving into an excruciating moral quandary. On the one hand, she is a mother who loves her son deeply and cannot bear the thought of seeing him suffer and on the other hand she is horrified by the idea of helping him end his life. However, on the other hand, she is appalled by the notion of aiding him in ending his life. Oswald's desperate plea for euthanasia prompts intricate questions regarding the essence of mercy, suffering and personal autonomy. Oswald, fearing the erosion of his independence, perceives death as the sole escape from the torment of his illness. For him, the prospect of existing in a state of mental and physical incapacitation is simply intolerable. For him, the idea of living in a state of mental and physical incapacitation is unbearable. Oswald, with his bohemian and modern values, believes in personal freedom and the right to choose the manner of his death. Mrs. Alving, on the other hand, shaped by religious norms, is repulsed by the idea of taking a life, even out of compassion. She has grappled with the tension between her instinct to shield him from pain and the necessity of confronting the stark truths of their shared history. Now, she faces a critical decision: should she honor his wish and alleviate his suffering, or should she adhere to the rigid moral and religious frameworks. The struggle within her, although profound, reflects broader conversations about duty and desire.

The climactic scene is undeniably tragic. Oswald, who has been increasingly plagued by his illness, collapses into a state of mental disarray. He repeatedly pleads for "the sun"



(a metaphor for the tranquility and relief he desperately yearns for amidst his suffering). This moment is profoundly symbolic, as the sun signifies both light and life. As Oswald slips into unconsciousness, Mrs. Alving finds herself alone with the packet of morphine he had entrusted to her. The conclusion is ambiguous: Mrs. Alving holds the morphine, yet she remains uncertain about whether she will administer it to her son. However, this tension underscores the weight of her dilemma. Ibsen leaves this decision unresolved, allowing the audience to grapple with the same moral dilemma that Mrs. Alving faces. Should she honour her son's wish and give him peace, or should she let him live, even if it meant prolonging his suffering? This ambiguity is crucial to the play's thematic depth. Mrs. Alving is torn between personal morality and social expectations, between love and duty, and between freedom and repression not knowing what to do. She stands frozen, staring at this excruciatingly painful situation with horror. The ending leaves the audience with no clear answers and much to struggle with.

Oswald (still tonelessly): The sun, the sun...

Mrs. Alving (springing up in despair, grasping her hair in both hands, screams): I can't bear it! (Whispering as though paralysed) I can't bear it...never! (Suddenly) Where did he put them? (Hurriedly feeling in his coat) Here! (She shrinks back a few paces and cries) No no no...Yes! No no... (She stands a step or two away from him, with her hands twisted in her hair, staring at him in speechless horror.)

Oswald (Sitting motionless as before, says): The sun...the sun. (Act III: 101-102)

Act III of *Ghosts* brings Ibsen's exploration of inherited guilt, social hypocrisy, and moral conflict to a devastating conclusion. The destruction of the Orphanage, Oswald's illness, Regina's departure, and Mrs. Alving's final torment illustrate the inescapability of the past and the profound consequences of suppressing the truth. Ibsen's portrayal of Mrs. Alving's struggle to reconcile her love for her son with the realities of his inherited disease offers a powerful critique of the social norms that demand conformity at the expense of individual freedom and truth. In the end, the "ghosts" that haunt the Alving family are not just the sins of the past but also the moral and social structures that prevent the characters from living authentic lives.

Summary of Key Events:

- ◆ **The orphanage burns down:** Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders learn that the orphanage, built in Captain Alving's memory, has been destroyed by fire. Pastor Manders feels guilty for not insuring the orphanage and is persuaded by Jacob Engstrand to cover up the incident as an accident.



- ◆ **Oswald reveals the severity of his illness:** Oswald confesses to Mrs. Alving that his illness (syphilitic paralysis) is serious and that the disease has started affecting his brain and body, causing increasing debilitation and mental lapses.
- ◆ **Mrs. Alving tells Regina the truth about her parentage:** Mrs. Alving reveals to Regina that she is the illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving, making her Oswald's half-sister. This revelation destroys any romantic possibility between Regina and Oswald.
- ◆ **Regina leaves the household:** Regina rejects the burden of her parentage and decides to return to Engstrand, choosing to join his plan to open a sailors' home.
- ◆ **Mother and son are left alone:** After Regina leaves Oswald asks his mother to help him die when the time comes. Oswald, dreading the loss of his autonomy, asks Mrs. Alving to administer morphine when he can no longer care for himself. He shows her the morphine he has been carrying as a means of ending his life when the disease takes full control.
- ◆ **Oswald suffers a mental collapse:** Oswald succumbs to a seizure and becomes unresponsive, repeatedly asking for "the sun". Mrs. Alving is left with the morphine in her hand, unsure about what is to be done.
- ◆ **Ambiguous ending:** The play ends with Mrs. Alving unable to make a choice. The ending is left open and unresolved.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) How does Engstrand manage to make Pastor Manders agree to his proposal?
- ii) What does the exchange between Engstrand and Pastor Manders reveal about their characters?
- iii) What does Mrs. Alving reveal about Regina in this act? and how does it affect the relationship between Regina and Oswald?
- iv) What happens to Oswald at the end?
- v) Why is the ending left ambiguous?

1.6 Ibsen and Realism/Naturalism

In this section, we will briefly discuss some of the influences that shaped Ibsen's dramatic art as well as his own thinking on theatre. We must keep in mind the fact that Ibsen was writing at a time when Europe was going through some radical transformations. Space



does not permit us to discuss all the impulses that contributed to the general literary landscape, but we will try to touch upon some significant developments that had a direct bearing on Ibsen's drama. The 19th century Europe was marked by sweeping social, political, and intellectual changes. It was an era shaped by the Industrial Revolution, scientific advancements, nationalist movements, and the rise of the middle class. Though all these changes had their impact on the state of the Theatre in varying degrees, we will discuss two major developments that had a direct impact on Ibsen's career as a playwright.

The first is related to the political developments taking place all over Europe. The rise of nationalism, particularly in countries striving for independence or unification, was an important development in so far as theatre was concerned. Playwrights used the stage to assert national identity and explore the cultural and historical roots of their nations. Historical plays portraying the struggle for national unity or independence resonated deeply with contemporary audiences. This, in turn, encouraged Romanticism in the theatre. So, what we see in early 19th-century drama is a kind of intermeshing of Nationalism and Romanticism. We lack the space to discuss in detail the various nuances of both these terms, but it will suffice to say that while Nationalism tried to unite people for a common cause and a shared past, Romanticism provided that shared heritage by making visible elements from their local myths and stories in glorious light so that it would inspire people to regain that glorious past. Hence, dramatists often feature heroic figures caught up in emotional and moral struggles in their plays. The other aspect of Romanticism was that it prioritized emotion, intuition, and imagination over the Enlightenment ideas of reason and intellect. In this way, it contrasted with the later movement toward realism, but it nonetheless set the stage for a new focus on the individual's inner life, which would continue to evolve through the century in more nuanced ways later, particularly in psychological realism. As you must have noticed in our earlier discussion in section 1.3, many of Ibsen's early plays are influenced by these two impulses.

The second important development that directly impacted Ibsen's work, especially the realist phase, is the scientific and industrial revolution and its various ramifications. The Industrial Revolution brought unprecedented technological advances which in turn led to the growth of industries, urbanization, a new working class, and significant changes in the social structures. The growing middle class began to exert cultural and economic influence. The theatre, traditionally a pastime for the aristocracy, became a place for the middle class to assert their values and perspectives. The demands of this audience for more realistic, relatable content brought in significant changes in theatre. Further, the economic inequality between the wealthy upper class and the poor working class led to new social tensions. In this fast-changing world, religion struggled to hold its sway over the people thereby



putting the traditional value systems under strain. All these developments had prepared the ground for a shift away from Romanticism in the theatre. The final push towards Realism in theatre came from the intellectual and scientific developments that were taking shape simultaneously, especially Darwin's theory of evolution and scientific positivism.

Ibsen was a perceptive observer of these changes happening around him. While his initial foray into theatre reflects his enthusiasm for romanticism and nationalism, he was soon looking to break away from it. His early plays, influenced by Norwegian nationalism and myths, did not bring him the success or the recognition that he was looking for. The public taste, as discussed earlier, was changing. So, he was looking to broaden his horizon and find an appropriate theatrical expression. The intellectual and scientific developments and the new social configurations demanded a technique that could give expression to the new realities. One model which was readily available for Ibsen, was the well-made play of Eugene Scribe (1791-1861). Scribe is a French dramatist, best known for formalizing the structure of the well-made play, a formulaic but tightly constructed approach to drama. His plays were built around a clear, logical progression of plot, where every action and line of dialogue advanced the story. He emphasized intricate plotting and suspense, usually revolving around secrets, misunderstandings, and surprising reversals. A typical Scribe play would open with clear exposition, providing essential background and set-up for the ensuing action followed by a dramatic event or piece of information that sets off the main events of the plot. Gradually the plot becomes increasingly complex, often involving secrets, mistaken identities, or hidden relationships. This is followed by a dramatic reversal often due to a new piece of information leading to the resolution of the conflict. So, it would, typically, follow an order-conflict- disorder- and finally restoration of order formula. The entire emphasis was on a logical unfolding of the plot and a final resolution.

Scribe was a prodigious writer and soon his influence spread to other parts of Europe and England as well. It will be erroneous to assume that his only contribution was neatly laid out plots or the element of surprise in them. Scribe can be credited with some innovations which later, in the skillful hands of a dramatist like Ibsen, became key features of modern realist theatre. One such innovation was to introduce characters from the real world, characters that the play going audience could easily identify with. Coupled with that, his comedies were built around day-to-day issues of modern bourgeois society. It was about the new middle class and its social and material aspirations. Not surprisingly, his plays were enormously popular with audiences, particularly the French middle class. His works were entertaining, accessible, and built around relatable social situations. Ibsen, who was already looking to break out of the romantic conventions, found the structural innovations of Scribe an extremely useful foundation for writing his realist and naturalist play.



Another impulse that influenced Ibsen was the Naturalism of Emily Zola. Both Zola and Ibsen were writing around the same time, and it would be fairly accurate to say that they were aware of each other's work. Though Zola is known for his fiction writing, he made some very important contributions to the theatre as well. One of the key contributions was the call to adopt naturalistic techniques in the theatre to present the audience with, as he called it, 'a slice of life'. Zola was impressed by the method of close observation used in natural sciences and the Darwinian theories about heredity and environment in human development. Zola fused all these elements together to advocate for a theatre that would; a) be realistic in its conception and in conformity with human psychology and behaviour, b) have flesh and blood characters whose actions, speech, and behaviour would be in conformity with heredity and the environment, and c) and the setting on the stage should be realistic and natural rather than theatrical and flashy. The general principle that Zola had in mind was that literature must be a tool of enquiry into the nature of human beings and the things around it rather than just a source of amusement. Ibsen, as we know, was working on similar lines for reasons we have already discussed. By the time Ibsen wrote *A Dolls House* (1879), he had already figured out the theatrical innovations that would usher in realism. So, we see most of the elements of what would go on to define naturalism in theatre already present in this play. All the characters like Nora, Torvald, Mrs. Linde, and others are drawn from contemporary society. They speak the everyday language of the common people and behave according to their motivations and character traits. The play with its feminist theme, not surprisingly, was hailed as a milestone.

1.6.1 Naturalism in *Ghosts*

From the time *A Dolls House* was published, the trajectory of Ibsen's development as a dramatist can be seen as a logical progression. *Ghosts* was published two years down the line and marks a maturing of the process that began earlier. Ibsen's realism is further refined and intensified in this play. It might seem like we are using the terms realism and naturalism interchangeably but that is not the case. Unlike realist plays, naturalistic plays dive deeper into the human psyche to unravel motivations and the impact of heredity and environment. In that sense, Ibsen moves beyond *A Dolls House* in *Ghosts*. In terms of technique the play is naturalistic in its orientation as well as execution. The setting and timeframe are compressed to give it a sense of immediacy. All the action in all three Acts happen in the large garden room of the Alving house and it all happens in the course of one day. The descriptions of the room and the setting make it a minimalistic and ordinary room that one could find in any other house of similarly situated people. The stage directions and arrangements are minimalistic as well. Everything looks realistic and believable. What makes this ordinary setting extraordinary is the effect that



is created by the atmosphere, the pace at which things move, the tone, tenor, and the everyday quality of the language used in the dialogues. The frequent coming and going of character in a small space, made darker by the cloudy atmosphere and the anxiety that underpins the exchanges between the characters, creates a sense of claustrophobia. The characters feel hemmed in by their circumstances and this feeling is clearly conveyed to the audience. The dramatic tension, arising out of the hidden secrets slowly tumbling out of the cupboards, is heightened further by this sense of claustrophobia. The trigger for all this is Oswald's return from Paris and the inauguration of an Orphanage built to honour his father, Captain Alving.

As discussed earlier, Ibsen was highly influenced by the social Darwinism prevalent at that time and believed that human character was determined by environment and heredity. This is something that is central to naturalistic plays and the same is true for Ibsen's *Ghosts*. The characters in the play are complex, multidimensional, and are determined by environment, heredity, and their own special circumstances. Characters like Oswald and Regina suffer the consequences of the past actions of their father, Captain Alving. The plot is centered around the dramatic unfolding of Captain Alving's past debauchery and wasted life that impinges on the lives of the children with devastating effect. But at the beginning of the play much of the information about Captain Alving's past is hidden. The dramatic unfolding of these hidden secrets not only creates a heightened dramatic interest but also creates a sense of foreboding. Keeping most of the key determinants of the plot offstage is most certainly deliberate and attests to Ibsen's extraordinary skills as a dramatist. He avoids any kind of sensationalism by keeping the debauchery of Captain Alving offstage, and thereby keeping the focus firmly on the psychological and hereditary consequences of his actions rather than the actions themselves. The title of the play springs from this operation focusing on future consequences of past actions. It also serves as a warning to the audience that the ghosts of present action will rise later irrespective of how hard you try to bury them. In *Ghosts*, this foreshadowing begins right at the beginning in the unnatural father daughter relationship that we witness. Ibsen delves deep into the psychological realism of characters by exploring their pasts, personal flaws, moral dilemmas they face, and the social circumstances that shape them. This allows him to delineate characters in all their complexity as they are shaped by the circumstances on which they have no control. If Oswald's present condition is determined by his father's sin, Mrs. Alving's profound despair and moral ambiguity is shaped by her circumstances and her gender. Each character has a story, a part of which he controls and a part which is beyond his control. This sense of an environmental determinism is further accentuated by the symbolism infused by Ibsen. The play is punctuated with symbols like 'ghosts' (persistent of the past), the 'sun' (warmth of truth that sets up a contrast with the moral



and psychological darkness around) and the ‘fire’ (inevitable destruction of untruths). Each one of them reinforces the major themes of the play. Ibsen’s use of symbolism in this play is measured and enhances the naturalistic feel. Overall, we can say that Ibsen’s multidimensional exploration of character and social issues, minimalistic setting, compressed time frame, and use of everyday language, hallmarks of naturalistic plays, makes *Ghosts* a good example of a naturalist play.

Check Your Progress 5

- i) What were the factors that influenced the realist turn in Modern European Drama?
- ii) What were the main features of the well-made-play of Eugene Scribe?
- iii) How did Emily Zola influence Modern European Drama?
- iv) What are the major naturalistic elements of *Ghosts*?

1.7 Important Themes in *Ghosts*

The major themes of *Ghosts* reflect Ibsen’s broader critique of 19th century Norwegian society’s moral hypocrisy, rigid social structures, and dubious moral values. Ibsen presents characters trapped in a complex web of social hypocrisy, personal responsibilities, and inherited sins. He tries to lay bare the deep tensions between the search for individual freedom within the oppressive socio-cultural and environmental determinants that shape human life. Some of the major themes in *Ghosts* are discussed below:

1.7.1 Heredity and Sin in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*

One of the central themes of the play is the idea of heredity and its relationship to sin. Ibsen explores the ways in which the sins and actions of one generation are passed down to the next, both biologically and morally. Heredity, in the play, serves as a fatalistic force that shapes the destiny of the characters, particularly in the case of Oswald, who suffers the consequences of his father’s sins. In *Ghosts*, heredity becomes the primary mechanism through which sin is transmitted, ultimately trapping the younger generation in the consequences of the previous one’s moral failures. Mrs. Alving tries to shield her son, Oswald, from his father’s influence by sending him away at a young age. However, despite her efforts, Captain Alving’s sins catch up with Oswald in the form of inherited syphilis. Oswald’s syphilis, a physical manifestation of his father’s sins, serves as a metaphor for the corrupting influence of past immorality and social hypocrisy. The disease symbolizes not just the hereditary curse of his father’s behavior, but also the moral decay that permeates the family and society at large.



Ibsen's critique of the transmission of sin is not limited to heredity alone. He also holds society responsible for perpetuating the cycle of sin through its rigid moral codes and its tendency to hide uncomfortable truths. Mrs. Alving reveals that she stayed with her husband despite his infidelity and moral failings due to social expectations and religious duty. It is Pastor Manders who convinces Mrs. Alving to endure her suffering in silence for the sake of maintaining the facade of respectability. He urges her to sacrifice her own happiness and that of her son for the sake of upholding social norms. Manders represents conventional morality and religious dogma. He says, "...*What right have we mortals to happiness? No, we have our duty to do, Mrs. Alving; and it was your duty to cleave to the man you had chosen, and to whom you were joined in holy matrimony.*" (*Ghosts*, Act I: 46). This attitude highlights his social complicity in perpetuating the sins of the father by enforcing a moral code that prevents people like Mrs. Alving from escaping toxic relationships or speaking the truth. Her decision to stay with Captain Alving, largely influenced by the social and religious expectations voiced by Pastor Manders, results in Oswald's ultimate doom. By repressing the truth about her husband, Mrs. Alving inadvertently sets the stage for her son's downfall.

The title of the play, *Ghosts*, serves as a metaphor for the lingering influence of past sins and the inescapable nature of heredity. As Mrs. Alving declares, "*I'm haunted by ghosts...we're all ghosts...its not only the things that we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old ideas and old dead beliefs, and things of that sort...we can't rid ourselves of them....And we are, all of us, so pitifully afraid of the light*" (*Ghosts*, Act II:61). This passage is self-explanatory. She is referring to the moral and psychological remnants of the past that continue to shape the present and that people are shaped in such a way that they are not only comfortable with lies and deceits but are also afraid of facing the truth, the light. These "ghosts" represent the hidden truths, the suppressed desires, and the unacknowledged sins that persist through generations, shaping the lives of the living. Ibsen suggests that by refusing to confront these truths openly, society allows them to continue their destructive influence.

Oswald's illness is the most literal manifestation of this haunting. The syphilis he inherits from his father is the ultimate "ghost" that comes to claim him. This illness, however, is not merely a physical one, it is symbolic of the spiritual and moral decay that the characters have inherited from previous generations. The disease represents the corrupting influence of suppressed truths and the moral compromises that Mrs. Alving and others have made to conform to prevailing social expectations.

Mrs. Alving's decision to finally speak openly about her husband's failings comes too late. Her attempt to escape the "ghosts" of her past by establishing a progressive orphanage



in her husband's memory is ironically destroyed fire. This fire serves as a symbol of the futility of trying to atone for sins through external gestures, while the internal, hidden truths remain unresolved. The hereditary curse that Oswald bears culminates in the play's tragic conclusion, where he begs his mother to help him end his life as the effects of syphilis worsen. His plea, "*Mother, give me the sun*" (*Ghosts*, Act III: 101), is a heart-wrenching cry for release from the burden he has inherited. This request for "the sun" represents his desire for clarity, freedom, and a release from the darkness of the past. Mrs. Alving, faced with the reality of the hereditary curse that has claimed her son is left powerless.

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen carefully weaves the themes of heredity and sin to critique the moral and social systems of his time. The play suggests a grim determinism, where the sins of one generation inevitably shape the fate of the next and attempts to suppress or deny these truths only lead to greater tragedy. Through the characters of Mrs. Alving and Oswald, Ibsen portrays the inescapable legacy of sin, not only as a biological inheritance but also as a social burden. Heredity, in this context, becomes a metaphor for the way in which moral corruption is passed down and perpetuated by a hypocritical society that refuses to confront its own flaws. By exposing the destructive power of these "ghosts," Ibsen challenges the audience to rethink the moral structures that govern their lives and to confront the truths that society prefers to hide away.

Check Your Progress 6

- i) What are the 'ghosts' that Mrs. Alving refers to?
- ii) What does Oswald's illness signify?
- iii) How does social and religious morality affect the characters in *Ghosts*?

1.7.2 Social Morality and the Position of Women

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen condemns the repressive social morality of 19th-century bourgeois society, especially when it concerns the status of women. In grappling with the devastating consequences of unyielding social expectations, moral hypocrisy and prescribed roles for women, the play becomes a blistering critique of how these systems of social order ensnare individuals, especially women. *Ghosts* demonstrate Ibsen's view of the time's dominant social morality of value, the value of social propriety over individual truth.

Ibsen's portrayal of social morality in *Ghosts* reveals the dominance of conventional values that prioritize public appearance over individual truth. In this society, personal freedom and happiness are often sacrificed to maintain a veneer of respectability. Individual liberty and joy are too often surrendered for the sake of a facade of propriety in



this society. Pastor Manders represents this rigid observance of social mores. He is more worried about maintaining social decorum than deeper moral issues. For instance, when Pastor Manders urges Mrs. Alving not to insure the orphanage he does so because it might suggest a lack of faith. He rejects a practical and pragmatic course of action, as subsequent events prove, with devastating consequences. This reveals how superficial moral values can lead to disastrous consequences, both figuratively and literally.

The title of the play, *Ghosts*, is rather appropriate as well. As Mrs. Alving describes it, these oppressive forces (Ghosts) are invisible presences that tell people how to be and what to think. Ibsen is quite sharp in his critique of society's unwillingness to confront uncomfortable truths, preferring instead to maintain false appearances, even at the cost of personal well-being. Women in the play, particularly Mrs. Alving and Regina, are the worst hit by the undesirable effects of social morality confined and contained as they are by the narrow roles imposed on them by society. They are expected to serve as moral pillars of the family, even at the expense of their own needs and desires. Mrs. Alving's life is a good example of how social morality traps women in a cycle of repression and self-sacrifice. As a young woman, she was forced to endure a loveless and abusive marriage to Captain Alving, a man of loose morals and destructive behavior. Despite his infidelity and immoral actions, she had to remain in her marriage and fulfill her 'duty' as a wife to preserve the family's image.

Mrs. Alving's decision to build the orphanage in memory of her husband was part of her attempt to mask the reality of his immorality. However, in doing so, she is complicit in perpetuating the lie that her husband was a respectable man. But we can understand her compulsions. In a society which forces women to suppress the truth and maintain the appearance of moral righteousness, even when they know that the reality is far from ideal, is hardly an ideal society. However, Mrs. Alving's journey throughout the play reflects a gradual awakening. We see that Ibsen's women characters do display the courage and the necessary moral strength to face the truth and change the course of their lives. Mrs. Alving realizes that her adherence to social expectations has caused her to live a life of emotional repression. She confesses to Pastor Manders that she sent Oswald away so that he could escape from the oppressive social morality that had destroyed her own happiness. Despite her efforts, she ultimately cannot protect her son from the consequences of his father's sins.

Another character who is trapped within the system is Regina, the maid and illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving. Her life demonstrates another aspect of how social morality restricts opportunities for women. She makes efforts to climb above her station and achieve a better life. She flirts with Oswald, hoping that a romantic relationship with



him could provide her with upward mobility. However, Regina's dreams are shattered when she learns that she is Oswald's half-sister. This revelation destroys any chance of a relationship with Oswald and, more broadly, any hope of escaping her position. Her illegitimate birth, a direct result of the sexual hypocrisy of the male-dominated society, ensures that she remains marginalized. Despite her limited resources, she is not afraid to leave the Alving household to chart a new course. Regina ultimately decides to return to her father, Jacob Engstrand, who plans to open a sailors' home. Regina's fate reflects how women of her class and background are trapped by social structures that prevent social advancement except through an advantageous marriage. But that route is now closed for her. So, she departs. But would she be able to improve her social standing at the sailors' home? Even her father's sailors' home, which he presents as a respectable venture, is tainted by his moral corruption. The role he envisages for Regina is one of a hostess to sea faring men. He tempts Regina with the possibility of finding a suitable man at his establishment. Regina has no choice but to follow her father. But she is not defeated. She hopes to make something out of her life at her father's establishment. So, it seems that women like Regina, despite their mental strength and agency, are constantly caught in systems of exploitation.

Ibsen exposes the double standards in the social morality of the time, particularly in how men and women are judged differently for the same behavior. Captain Alving's debauchery and infidelity is largely ignored or covered up by society. This is revealed in the conversation between Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders.

Pastor Manders: Just think! For a miserable three hundred dollars to go and marry a fallen woman!

Mrs. Alving: Then what do you think of me? I went and married a fallen man.

...

Mrs. Alving: Do you really think that when I went to the altar with Alving, he was any purer than Johanna was when Engstrand married her?

Pastor Manders: Ah, but there is all the difference in the world between...

Mrs. Alving: Not so much really. Of course there was a big difference in the price. A miserable three hundred dollars, and a whole fortune. (Ghosts, Act II: 57)

Pastor Manders thinks there is a world of difference between his infidelity and the maid he seduces. That is why he has no hesitation calling her a 'fallen woman'. But for the same sin, he is not willing to call Captain Alving 'a fallen man'. He is still considered a respectable man, and even in death. His memory is preserved by the orphanage built in his name. On the other hand, Mrs. Alving and Regina face harsh judgment and limited



options because of his immoral behavior. The social role assigned to women as the moral guardians of the family is nothing short sheer hypocrisy. Mrs. Alving is expected to keep up appearances, even as she suffers in a marriage that destroys her happiness. Regina, as an illegitimate daughter, is forced to bear the burden of her father's sins, while Captain Alving faces no public consequences for his actions. This double standard highlights how women are disproportionately punished for moral failings, even when they are not directly responsible for them.

Although the position of women in *Ghosts* is largely one of subservience, Ibsen also presents moments of female agency and resistance. Mrs. Alving's eventual rejection of Pastor Manders moral authority and her open criticism of social expectations represent a bold challenge to the conventions of the time. She questions the validity of the rigid moral code that has shaped her life and contributed to her suffering. Mrs. Alving's desire to embrace the truth, even at great personal cost, reflects her growing sense of independence and her recognition that the lies and deceptions of society are unsustainable. Regina, too, exhibits a degree of agency in her decision to leave the Alving household. Although her options are limited, she chooses to pursue a different path rather than remain confined by the constraints of the household or by the legacy of her father's actions. Her departure represents a refusal to accept her predetermined role, even if the alternatives are not ideal.

Ghosts is a scathing critique of the social morality that traps individuals, especially women, within suffocating environments. The play exposes how society's obsession with outward respectability often leads to hypocrisy, repression, and the perpetuation of moral decay. Women are shown to bear the brunt of these social forces, as they are forced to conform to socially acceptable subservient roles. Through the characters of Mrs. Alving and Regina, Ibsen illustrates both the damaging effects of these constraints as well as the potential for resistance, even in the face of overwhelming social odds.

Check Your Progress 7

- i) Ibsen's women characters are forced to carry the burden of social morality. Would you agree?
- ii) Mrs. Alving's journey is one of the passive acceptances of reality to active engagement with the reality. Would it be a fair assessment of Mrs. Alving's character?
- iii) Ibsen's women characters are victim of their social circumstances and yet they display a rare agency to try and change their circumstances. Discuss.



1.8 Ibsen's Technique of Characterization

Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* showcases social, psychological, and existential themes through his characterization techniques. His characters are complex and deep, serving as symbolic representations of broader issues. Ibsen's psychological realism in characterization is a significant contribution to Modern European Drama, with each character believable and rounded. His characters are crafted with remarkable depth and complexity, serving not only as individuals with distinct personalities but also as symbolic representations of the broader issues the play addresses. His approach to characterization in *Ghosts* reflects his broader commitment to realism and his ability to infuse his characters with psychological nuance.

Characters in *Ghosts* are portrayed with a deep inner life, filled with conflicts, desires, and motivations that make them life like. Ibsen creates characters that are shaped by their past experiences, social circumstances, and inner conflicts. For example, Mrs. Alving is portrayed as a woman struggling with the consequences of years of repression and social expectations. She has been forced to maintain a facade of respectability even though this facade has caused her deep suffering and disillusionment. Her decision to send her son Oswald away and her concealment of the truth about her husband's debauchery are not exactly moral failings. They are the consequences of social pressures and her desire to protect her son.

Similarly, Oswald, apart from being a victim of inherited illness, is a young man grappling with disillusionment, existential despair, and a yearning for freedom. His tragic condition is depicted with sensitivity. Hunted by his father's legacy, he yearns for a life that is meaningful and joyous. As you can see, Ibsen is fairly successful in creating multi-dimensional characters. They are not defined by simple moral categories of good or bad. Though some of their actions are morally questionable, their complex psychological make up redeems them.

Characters in *Ghosts* are psychologically realistic but they also have a symbolic function. Most of the characters are presented either as victims of some social evil or as embodying some social evil and sometimes a mixture of both. For instance, Mrs. Alving and Oswald are victims of inherited sin and social hypocrisy. While Mrs. Alving suffers the consequences of keeping up appearances, Oswald is a victim of the "ghosts" of the past. He is haunted by his father's immoral actions and doomed to suffer consequences. Pastor Manders symbolizes the moral rigidity and hypocrisy of organized religion and its



authority. His concern for appearances, rather than genuine moral integrity, reflects the hollowness of religious institutions. Regina represents the struggle for social mobility and the limited role of women in a patriarchal society. Though she aspires to a higher social status, she is ultimately trapped by the limitations of her birth and gender. And, finally, Engstrand serves as a symbol of opportunism and moral ambiguity. By creating characters that serve as symbols, Ibsen gives the play a broader thematic resonance. The personal struggles of the characters reflect the larger social, moral, and existential dilemmas of the times.

Another key feature of Ibsen's technique in developing his characters is the use of dialogue and action. Ibsen avoids direct exposition of characters, allowing them rather to reveal themselves gradually through their interactions with each other. Ibsen avoids lengthy monologues or overt declarations of character motivations, opting instead for naturalistic dialogue that allows the audience to infer the complexities of the characters' inner lives. For instance, Mrs. Alving's gradual revelations about her past emerge through conversations with Pastor Manders and Oswald. The characters' dialogues are often filled with a subtext that hints at deeper truths that are not immediately stated, thereby creating a sense of mystery and psychological tension. The characters' actions also reveal their personalities and moral standing. Pastor Manders's reluctance to insure the orphanage, for example, reveals his obsession with maintaining appearances, while Mrs. Alving's decision to reveal the truth demonstrates her ultimate rejection of social moral straight jacketing.

Most of the character in *Ghosts* are, in some way or the other, striving for a better life or a sense of liberation. And yet, ironically, they are trapped by forces beyond their control. The tragic irony of their respective situations heightens the emotional impact of the play, and the audience is invited to empathize with the characters as they try to escape their fate. Ironically again, this attempt at escape leads them deeper into tragedy. For example, Mrs. Alving's attempts to protect Oswald prove to be counterproductive because it pushes Oswald further into the trap. Similarly, Regina's desire for social mobility is undone by the revelation of her illegitimate birth, which ties her to the very life she hoped to escape. Though Ibsen's characters are fully realized individuals, each with their own inner conflicts and desires, they are also vehicles for exploring the broader themes of the play like social repression, inheritance, and moral decay. Through naturalistic dialogue, subtext, and carefully crafted interactions, Ibsen reveals the complexities of his characters, making them both tragic and deeply human. In *Ghosts*, Ibsen's technique of characterization serves as a powerful tool for examining the individual's struggle against the constraints of society and the ghosts of the past.

**Check Your Progress 8**

- i) What is psychological realism and how does Ibsen use it to create multidimensional characters?
- ii) How does Ibsen use tragic irony to heighten the emotional impact of the play?
- iii) What are the major features of Ibsen's technique of characterization?

1.9 Major Characters in *Ghosts***1.9.1 Mrs. Alving**

Mrs. Helene Alving, the central character of *Ghosts*. She is a woman shaped by her past, her society, and her gradual realization that the 'ghosts' of the past can only be shaken off by the truth. She is the widow of Captain Alving. Her entire life has been a struggle against the oppressive norms of 19th-century society. She is a tragic figure, not because of any fatal flaw in character, but because she is an undeserving victim of prevailing social morality and conventions that she is unable to escape.

Mrs. Alving is married to Captain Alving, a respectable and influential figure. However, everything is not hunky dory. There is a significant mismatch between outward appearance and inward reality in this marriage. Captain Alving is, in fact, a morally degenerate man. Though Mrs. Alving is aware of his debauchery, she is trapped in this marriage without any possibility of escape. She did try to break free from this situation by fleeing from her husband and seeking refuge with Pastor Manders, but it ended in failure. Manders ensured that she returned to her husband, sacrificing her personal desires and enduring years of misery to maintain the illusion of respectability. This decision represents a critical moment in Mrs. Alving's life, setting the stage for the internal conflicts that would play out later in the play. Mrs. Alving is a product of a society where the women are expected to uphold ideals of chastity, submission, and self-sacrifice. Ibsen portrays her as a victim of these oppressive norms. She returns to Captain Alving, despite knowing his true nature, because she has nowhere to turn to. She chooses to conceal the truth about her marriage and continues to play the role of the dutiful wife. It is easy for us to judge her separated as we are from her special circumstances. But we must keep in mind that she had very little choice after Pastor Manders refused to help her. However, in her attempt to uphold the outward respectability of the Alving family name, Mrs. Alving is complicit in perpetuating a lie that will have devastating consequences later for her son.



Mrs. Alving's role as a mother is central to the play and to her character development. For her, Oswald is both her hope for the future and the tragic embodiment of the past. Throughout the play, Mrs. Alving seeks to protect Oswald from the truth about his father. This would be the normal response of a mother under adverse conditions. However, Oswald's return from Paris with symptoms of syphilis, a hereditary consequence of Captain Alving's debauchery, shatters this hope. Mrs. Alving's idealized vision of her son as an artist and a representative of the future collapses as she realizes that Oswald too is haunted by the "ghosts" of the past. She is forced to acknowledge the need to reveal the truth to Oswald and Regina.

Mrs. Alving undergoes a significant transformation, evolving from a woman who passively gives in to social and moral conventions to one who recognizes the need to rebel against them. But she is not yet ready to make a complete break. Her construction of the orphanage is a case in point. The Orphanage, built in her husband's memory, is an ironic reflection on the ambiguous situation she finds herself in. The Orphanage, as she knows, is not going to free her from the past because it is a meaningless and empty gesture. And yet she goes ahead with it. Her discussions with Pastor Manders serve as key moments in her intellectual and emotional awakening. As the play progresses, she grows more assertive in questioning Mander's views on duty, morality, and the sanctity of marriage. She begins to see the hypocrisy of the society around her, especially the way it sanctifies immoral men like her husband while condemning women who try to break free from their subjugation.

By the final act of the play, Mrs. Alving has become fully aware of the forces that have shaped her life. She realizes that the true "ghosts" of her life are not just the memory of her husband's sins, but the social norms that have kept her trapped in a false existence. She decides to reject her won passivity and become proactive in asserting the truth. Despite her awakening, Mrs. Alving's story ends tragically. Oswald's illness and eventual plea for euthanasia highlight the inescapable consequences of the past. Mrs. Alving is confronted with the unbearable choice between allowing her son to suffer a living death and helping him to end his misery. The play closes at this moment of indecision, leaving Mrs. Alving in a state of existential torment. Her love for her son, her guilt over the choices she has made, and the ghosts that haunt them both culminate in a devastating moral crisis. This is what makes Mrs. Alving a deeply tragic figure and yet at the same time a woman of immense strength.

1.9.2 Pastor Manders

Pastor Manders is a clergyman with considerable authority, both religious and social. Manders serves as a foil to Mrs. Alving. Ibsen primarily uses the character of Manders to



critique institutionalized religion and its role in perpetuating a stifling social order. Pastor Manders is introduced as a spiritual guide and advisor to Mrs. Alving. His presence in the Alving household at the start of the play is directly tied to his role as the moral overseer of the orphanage being constructed in Captain Alving's memory. His involvement in the project itself, as it turns out, is ironical because it seeks to honor a man whose private life was corrupt and immoral. Manders does not question this hypocrisy. He is rather committed to preserving it. His unwavering belief in the sanctity of reputation and appearance illustrates his shallow understanding of morality. He believes that by keeping the truth of Captain Alving's debauchery hidden, society can move forward without confronting the unpleasant realities of the past. This is a major flaw in Manders' character. His moral compass is dictated by public opinion rather than any true spiritual insight.

When Mrs. Alving fled from her husband's abusive behavior and sought Manders' help, he had sent her back to her husband, citing her "duty" as a wife. This moment is central to understanding Manders' character. His advice is not based on empathy or understanding, but on a rigid interpretation of social roles. He is incapable of understanding Mrs. Alving's need to escape from her oppressive marriage because he himself is trapped within the confines of conventional thinking. He fears the judgment of others more than the emotional and spiritual well-being of the individuals under his care. This is evident throughout the play as he constantly worries about appearances, reputation, and how his decisions will be perceived by others.

Manders is also a hypocrite. He preaches morality and virtue but has no qualms about compromising with those virtues for saving his own skin. His superficial understanding of morality is particularly evident in his interaction with Regina and her father, Jakob Engstrand. Engstrand is a disreputable man, yet Manders is easily manipulated by him. Manders' hypocrisy is set up as a counterfoil to Mrs. Alving's growing awareness of the darker, more complicated truths that lie beneath the surface of society. While Mrs. Alving begins to question the validity of conventional morality, Manders clings to it, unable to see the hypocrisy in his own behavior. For example, when the orphanage is destroyed by fire due to his own carelessness (he refused to insure it because he feared the scandal of appearing faithless), he immediately tries to deflect responsibility on to the wicked household of Mrs. Alving. And as soon as Engstrand is ready to take the blame, his views on Engstrand's character changes dramatically. Obviously, he is a selfish man, and he is concerned with his own image rather than taking responsibility for his mistakes. And yet Manders sees himself as Mrs. Alving's moral superior. He is judgmental but his judgments are based on an outdated social morality rather than any real understanding of right and wrong. Mrs. Alving's increasing frustration with Manders reflects her realization that his



guidance has been a significant factor in her life's miseries. She trusted him in the past, allowing him to send her back to her abusive husband, but now she sees that his advice was more about protecting social order than protecting her as an individual.

It may not be erroneous to say that Pastor Manders is indirectly responsible for much of the tragedy that unfolds in *Ghosts*. At the end, Manders remains largely unrepentant and unaffected by the suffering of Mrs. Alving and Oswald, and the people supposed to be under his care. Unlike Mrs. Alving, who undergoes a painful but necessary awakening to the reality of her situation, Manders retreats into his moral platitudes, unwilling or unable to confront the complexity of the world around him and achieve genuine moral insight. He represents the kind of moral conservatism that Ibsen sought to criticize.

1.9.3 Oswald

Oswald's life is a living example of the idea that *Ghosts* of the past live on in the present. He returns home from Paris after spending considerable time abroad as an artist, only to reveal that he is suffering from a mysterious illness. We come to know, in the course of the play, that he is suffering from hereditary syphilis. His illness is both a physical and symbolic manifestation of the "ghosts" of his father's sins. His fate is sealed by his father's sins and moral failings. Ibsen uses Oswald's plight to critique the idea that one can hide or suppress the truth indefinitely. The "ghosts" of the past will always resurface and exert their influence on the present and future. Oswald's pays the price for the web of lies and untruths supposedly created to protect him and maintain the appearance of respectability and social morality.

Having grown up in the shadow of the idealized image of his father, Oswald is shattered to learn that he is suffering from the dreaded syphilis. He blames himself for wasting his own life. He is doubly shattered when he learns the truth about Captain Alving's debauchery. This revelation is devastating not only because it destroys Oswald's image of his father, but also because it casts a shadow over his own life. He comes to realize that the father he admired was not the moral figure he had been led to believe. Oswald's disillusionment extends beyond his personal life. His experiences as an artist in Paris, where he sought freedom and creativity, left him cynical about life because he found that even in the Bohemian circles of Paris, true freedom or happiness was hardly ever understood. His desire to live a "joyous" life turns into an existential despair by his illness and social circumstances.

Oswald wants to be free. His desire for liberation is also evident in his plea to his mother at the end of the play. As his illness progresses and he faces the prospect of losing his mental faculties, he begs Mrs. Alving to help him end his life when the time comes.



This request for euthanasia is Oswald's final attempt to exert control over his own fate, to escape the legacy of his father's sins and the inevitable decline that his illness will bring. His desire to die with dignity, rather than live out his life in a state of helplessness, reflects his need for agency in a world that has largely denied him any real freedom.

The relationship between Oswald and his mother, ironically, turns into a relationship of deep dependence, both emotionally and physically. He has returned from Paris because his illness had become quite serious. He was hoping to find some solace in the love and care of her mother as well as Regina. But things turn out contrary to what he had hoped for. After learning that Oswald is her half-brother Regina leaves the house. And now Oswald only has his mother to turn to. He becomes increasingly reliant on Mrs. Alving for care, culminating in his final request that she assist him in ending his life. This dependence contrasts with his earlier desire for independence and freedom. This tragic irony of his situation is not lost on the audience. Oswald, who once sought to live freely, is now trapped by his illness and must rely on his mother to release him from his suffering.

Oswald is a victim of forces beyond his control and that makes him a tragic figure. Unlike many of Ibsen's other characters, Oswald does not make choices that lead to his downfall. Instead, he is doomed by circumstances he did not create. The sense of inevitability is what makes Oswald's tragedy so profound. He is a young man who should have had his whole life ahead of him, but he is instead condemned to suffer for the sins of his father. His attempts to live a meaningful, joyous life are continually thwarted by the reality of his illness and the weight of his family's past.

1.9.4 Regina

Regina is presented as the daughter of Jakob Engstrand. But we know later that she is indeed the half-sister of Oswald, and that Engstrand is her foster father. This fact itself puts her in a complex and ambiguous situation. Instead of benefiting from the fact that she is Captain Alving's daughter, she is condemned to a life of marginal existence. Regina represents the conflicts between aspirations to transcend social systems and the need for moral compromise. Her ambition, her complicated relationship with her origins, and her part in the play's larger tragedy all serve to define her character. Regina has a strong desire to elevate herself from the start of the play. She longs to rise above her station because she is unhappy in her role as a servant in the Alving home. Her relationships with other characters, especially her contempt for her presumed father, Jakob Engstrand, and her wish to keep her distance from him, reflect this aim.

Regina's social situation is problematic. She belongs to the Alving household and yet she exists on its margins. While her desire for self-improvement is natural, her willing-



ness to use others, particularly Oswald, as a means of escaping her circumstances reveals a willingness to compromise her morals. Regina's aspiration for social mobility is not based on any intrinsic sense of personal merit or accomplishment because she has none. She relies on her ability to manipulate her relationships and present herself in a way that might attract attention from those above her. This makes her character somewhat opportunistic. We can see this in her relationship with Oswald. On the surface, it appears that she is romantically interested in him, and there is a mutual attraction between the two. However, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Regina's interest in Oswald is not solely based on love or affection. She sees in Oswald a potential means of escaping her life as a servant. Regina's relationship with Oswald becomes more complicated when it is revealed that they are, in fact, half-siblings. This revelation devastates her. The very relationship that she hoped would provide her with a way out of her difficult life is tainted by the moral corruption of the previous generation. Her dreams of social mobility and a better future crumbled under the weight of her inherited identity. Regina ultimately returns to Engstrand at the end of the play. This return is not motivated by any reconciliation or affection for Engstrand, but rather by necessity. It underscores the tragic limitations of her situation.

Regina can also be seen as a foil to Mrs. Alving. Both women are, in different ways, victims of the same system, but their responses to the system differ. Mrs. Alving, after years of repression and self-sacrifice, is disillusioned with the institutions of marriage, religion, and social respectability. Regina, on the other hand, is still striving to succeed within that very system, hoping to use her beauty, charm, and relationships to climb the social ladder. Mrs. Alving ultimately seeks freedom through truth and transparency. Regina is only interested in improving her social status. The contrast between the two women highlights the different ways in which they navigate the same oppressive social structures. Regina fails to achieve her goals. But her options are limited by her gender and her class. She can only hope to improve her situation through marriage or relationships with men of higher social standing. Her return to Engstrand at the end of the play is a bitter acknowledgment of the fact that, despite her best efforts, she cannot escape the circumstances of her birth.

It is easy to brand Regina as a morally ambiguous character. However, we can see that she acts the way she acts because of the limited options available to her as a young woman of lower social standing. In a world where her value is largely determined by her beauty and her relationships with men, Regina's opportunism is nothing more than a survival strategy.



1.9.5 Engstrand

Jakob Engstrand is a minor but important character in the play. He is a figure of practical self-interest and opportunism. As a working-class man with a questionable moral, he navigates his way around in the society with cunning and deception. Engstrand is introduced as a carpenter, a man of humble means, and the supposed father of Regina. His social position contrasts with the wealth and influence of the other characters, such as Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders. This class difference explains and puts in perspective Engstrand's actions. His life is a constant struggle for economic survival, and his moral flexibility seems to be a response to his social circumstances.

Engstrand's moral outlook is pragmatic, and he has no qualms about bending the truth or manipulating others to achieve his goals. A prime example of this is his relationship with Pastor Manders. Engstrand deftly plays on the pastor's sense of guilt and moral obligation, convincing him to support his project against Manders' better judgement. Engstrand knows that Manders is more concerned with appearances and public perception than with the truth, and he uses this knowledge to manipulate Manders into backing his plan. When the orphanage burns down, most likely due to Manders' own negligence, Engstrand quickly steps in to cover for the pastor, offering to take the blame for the fire in exchange for financial support for his seamen's home. This moment exemplifies Engstrand's opportunism. He seizes the opportunity to exploit Manders' vulnerability with both hands and turns the situation to his advantage.

Engstrand claims to be Regina's father, knowing very well that it is a lie. This is a morally questionable act but for him morality is of very little use if it can't help him with financial independence. By claiming paternity, he legitimizes Regina's birth in exchange for cash and the possibility of reaping future benefits. She represents a potential source of financial or social leverage. Engstrand's moral code is highly fluid, driven more by survival and personal gain than by any real concern for right and wrong. As a lower-class man in a rigidly hierarchical society, his survival depends on his ability to navigate a system that is often stacked against him. In this sense, Engstrand is less of an inherently immoral person and more of a pragmatist. Ibsen presents him as a product of his environment.

Engstrand plays a key role in Ibsen's exploration of the themes of hypocrisy and moral decay. While Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders are more directly involved in the play's exploration of duty, guilt, and personal morality, Engstrand represents the underbelly of the society that Ibsen is critiquing. His ability to manipulate the moral systems in place demonstrates how easily social and moral values can be subverted when society values appearances at the cost of truth.



Check Your Progress 9

- i) Would it be correct to say that Mrs. Alving is defined by her passivity? Discuss.
- ii) How does Ibsen explore the theme of inherited sin and its consequences in the character of Oswald?
- iii) Regina is nothing but an opportunist. Do you agree with this statement? Give your reasons.
- iv) Engstrand's dubious moral standards seem less damaging when we compare it with Pastor Manders. Discuss.

1.10 Summing Up

- ◆ Ibsen contributed immensely to the development of Modern European Drama. He broke new grounds in terms of the dramatic techniques he used and the themes he explored. He was instrumental in introducing realism and naturalism in theater.
- ◆ *Ghosts* marks a significant departure from the traditional forms of theater. It boldly confronted moral taboos, such as sexual transgressions, illegitimacy, venereal disease, and euthanasia, topics that were considered scandalous in Ibsen's time. *Ghosts* directly challenged the conventional morality of the 19th century, particularly the institutions of marriage, religion, and family.
- ◆ The play's central metaphor of "ghosts" deals with the idea that the past haunts the present, both psychologically and physically and eventually destroys individuals and families.
- ◆ Ibsen's use of realism in *Ghosts* was groundbreaking especially in terms of character development. His characters are psychologically complex, filled with internal conflicts, and driven by hidden motives, making them more human and relatable than the stock figures of earlier melodrama. This deep psychological insight, along with naturalistic dialogue, set a new standard for drama. By focusing on real-life dilemmas rather than romanticized or idealized conflicts, Ibsen brought an uncomfortable but necessary honesty to the stage, reflecting the uncertainties of modern life.
- ◆ Though *Ghosts* was condemned for its perceived immorality at that time, it paved the way for a more honest exploration of human behavior and social issues in theater. It helped usher in a new era of dramatic realism that influenced later playwrights such as Chekhov, Shaw, and Strindberg, and laid the groundwork for modern tragic theater.



- ◆ Finally, *Ghosts* is considered a cornerstone of modern drama for its courage in addressing uncomfortable truths and its influence on the form and content of European theater.

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Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*

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Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Learning Objectives
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2.1 Introduction

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children: A Chronicle of the Thirty Years War*, written in 1939 and premiered in 1941, is considered one of the most significant works of twentieth century theatre. Originally written in German as *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, the play is set against the backdrop of the Thirty Years War (1618--648) that had a powerful impact on European history. The protagonist, Mother Courage is a war profiteer who works as a tradeswoman, selling her goods to soldiers while struggling to protect her three children. The play was written at the time when Nazism was on a rise in Germany and was first performed at the onset of World War II.

2.2 Learning Objectives

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- ◆ Understand the play as a commentary on war.
- ◆ Discuss the significance of epic theatre within the framework of 20th-century Modernist Drama.



- ◆ Understand modern European drama in the context of Brecht's politics.
- ◆ Contextualize the play in its socio-historical background.
- ◆ Evaluate Brecht's ideas on drama, capitalism, and war.
- ◆ Engage with different interpretations of the text.

2.3 Introduction to the Author and His Work

The Life of Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) was a renowned playwright, theatre practitioner, and poet of the 20th century. He was born in 1898 to an upper middle-class family in Augsburg, Germany. He attended the Augsburg Grammar School and was in his teens when World War I broke out in 1914. From an early age, Brecht developed pacifist views and, as he matured, he grew increasingly critical of class divisions, viewing himself as a rebel (Chatterjee xiii). Developing a talent for writing in the early phases of his life, he wrote and locally published his first poems, short stories, and a play, *The Bible*, in 1914. During the war, he was also inducted into military service around 1917, and this traumatic experience left a deep emotional impact on him. Brecht had a keen understanding of the political events of his charged times. The success of his early plays *Baal* (1918) and *Drums in the Night* (1922) set the tone for his later journey as a playwright, and he was awarded the Kleist prize, as the most promising young playwright of the year in 1922.

By now, Brecht had made several important contacts and had grown close to well-known theatre artists like Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator. He was working on his theories about drama and theatre and produced several plays which became critical and commercial successes. *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) was one such play that also helped him develop his style of theatre, which he called epic theatre. He married the actress Helene Weigel the next year and devised many new didactic plays, or *Lehrstück*, like *The Fight over the Ocean* (1929) and *The Measures Taken* (1930). Some of his Marxist plays include *St Joan of Stockyards* (1931), a radio play, and an adaptation of Maxim Gorky's novel *The Mother* (1932). Many of these plays were co-written with other authors. Elizabeth Hauptmann was one of his primary collaborators, who shares credit for many of his notable works.

In 1933, with the rise of the Nazi Party, Brecht fled Germany to take refuge abroad and stayed shortly in Prague, Vienna, Paris, London, Moscow and New York. Eventually, he lost his German citizenship and the right to return to Germany. Some of his highly celebrated and mature plays were written during his years of exile. These include *The Life of Galileo* (1938), *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), *Mr. Puntilla and his Hired*



Man Matti (1940), and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1941). As Europe became harder for him to survive the war, he migrated to the United States in 1941. While in America, he wrote some scripts for Hollywood and some new plays as well. However, his stay in America was not very fruitful, as some of his plans did not materialize. Furthermore, he was also summoned by the House of Un-American Activities for Communist sympathies. Subsequently, he left America, finally settling back in post-war East Germany in 1948. *Mother Courage and her Children* was produced in 1949, becoming a great success. He established the Berliner Ensemble, the German Theatre Company, in 1949 and, with state patronage, he was further able to experiment with his stage productions. With many of his plays being runaway successes over the years, Brecht became a very successful and celebrated theatre practitioner across the world. He wrote and directed a few new plays afterwards and passed away in the year 1956. His legacy lives through his revolutionary plays and pathbreaking stage practices.

2.4 Epic Theatre

Throughout his career as a dramatist, Brecht kept innovating and continued to develop his theories on theatre. While he was growing in popularity as a dramatist, Hitler's Nazi party was on the rise. In this atmosphere of fear and censorship, Brecht had reason to believe that a powerful form of art, like theatre, could have a higher purpose. His conceptualization of epic theatre was, therefore, a step towards the education and sensitization of the audience.

Before the onset of modernist theatre, the romanticism of German theatre artists like Goethe and Schiller dominated the stage. These plays emphasised idealism, melodrama, and heightened emotions. Brecht wanted to depart from such conventions of theatre, as they tended to take the given reality as something inevitable and irreconcilable (Chatterjee xxvi). He also departed from early modernist theories of theatre which treated drama as a slice of life. Theatre practitioners like Stanislavsky had proposed that life on stage was an imitation of real life. For Brecht, this too was not a genuine portrayal of reality, in fact it further falsified reality and inspired empathy in the audience which, according to him, interfered with their critical engagement with the subject matter. Brecht, therefore, wanted an audience that was who was alert, yet detached. For Brecht, the ideas that the play conveyed, were more crucial to the play than its plot. So, he called this new kind of theatre "epic theatre".

While the term "epic" to describe a dramatic form sounds counter-intuitive, the idea behind this terminology was that, just like an epic, the separate sections of the epic theatre



would be distinct and complete units in themselves. In his essay, “Theatre for Pleasure, or Theatre for Instruction”, he explains, “with an epic work, as opposed to a dramatic one, one can, as it were, take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life” (70). He also coined the term “Verfremdung” or “verfremdungseffect” translated as differencing, estrangement or distancing effect, that would defamiliarize the audience from the events of the play. Furthermore, he argues that in epic theatre, the spectator is not allowed to submit to an event uncritically. Unlike dramatic theatre, the spectator is, therefore, lulled out of his traditional way of thinking to be startled and think afresh (71). The basic aim of epic theatre was to educate its audience by forcing them to see the play from a detached, “alienated” point of view, rather than being emotionally involved.

A method that Brecht followed to create a Verfremdungseffect was the literalization of theatre (Brecht “Literalization of Theatre”). He used statistics, cartoons, maps, and placards so that a documentary effect could be produced. Each episode, therefore, would be framed in a different setting, almost as a play-within a play, and these episodes would connect with each other. The props, the stage setting and, even music, are very important aspects of epic theatre, as all these devices help the audience to critically engage with the play. The props and set design communicate to the audience, what kind of dramatic experience is being presented. It can be entertaining and instructive, but not cathartic. Katherine Hollander describes this succinctly in the context of *Mother Courage and her Children*.

For example, it is not necessary that Anna Fierling’s dress be a perfect seventeenth Century replica, accurate down to the last historical detail, but audiences will notice, the spoon hanging from her jacket, the pocket of her knife, or the care with which she handles the coin purse, and see the social meanings in these objects and gestures.... Props can tell a story, just as words or gestures do, and set design and lighting, too, can contribute to the audience’s understanding of the social and economic realities within which that story unfolds (32)

You will also notice, that there are significant gaps between the scenes. For instance, Scene II takes place two years after Scene I, and Scene III occurs three years after Scene II. Similarly, the setting of all the scenes keeps changing. Mother Courage moves from Sweden, to Poland in Scene I and II, Scene V informs us that she has been to Moravia, Bavaria, Italy, and again to Bavaria. This episodic nature adds to the distancing effect. Each episode, though brief, stands alone as a complete unit, and yet, continuity is maintained. Brecht also introduced various innovative techniques to create this distancing effect. For instance, stage directions for each scene are displayed on placards by the actors, often



giving away the plot of that scene in advance. In the first scene, for example, the placard reads, “The Canteen Woman, Anna Fierling, commonly known as Mother Courage loses a Son” (Brecht 23). These techniques encourage a sense of detachment in the audience, shifting the focus from simply following the storyline, or getting emotionally carried away by the realism of the scene. The attempt, therefore, is to educate and sensitise the audience.

2.5 Historical Setting of the Play

Brecht sets his anti-war play in one of the longest political conflicts in European history. The Thirty Years War initially erupted between Protestants and Catholics in 1618, but it soon became a complex and longstanding political conflict that engulfed most European powers of that era. Though it finally ended in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, it had caused great damage to most of the civilian populations of both Catholic and Protestant beliefs and killed millions of people.

The war began when the ruler of Bohemia (now, the Czech Republic), Ferdinand II wanted to impose Catholicism over a largely Protestant territory. This, however, became contentious, and a war erupted between Denmark and Bohemia. While this phase remained essentially localized and religious, more armies kept joining the war, and it soon took a political turn. Soon, Sweden, Poland, Netherlands, and Spain joined the war, making it one of the longest conflicts in the seventeenth century. At a religious level, the war was between the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists (three different Christian denominations). However, these alliances kept shifting, and rulers chose to politically align with opposing religious factions to annex more territory. At a human level, though, the war left most of Europe devastated. The armies of both sides plundered farms, villages, towns, and cities as they marched ahead, leaving them ravaged for years to come. With the widespread disease and starvation, the war caused a massive loss of human life, with the German population shrinking to half (Chatterjee xxxvii).

Brecht uses this intertwined religious and political context to make a sharp critique of war. When he was writing the play, he was still in Germany, a little before World War II erupted. The Thirty Years War provides the perfect context to Brecht to critique the politics and power dynamics of war itself. Furthermore, Brecht’s idea was also to show a bottom-up version of history, or a “worm’s eye view” of history, where, great historical events are only background to the events happening to common people, in a way blocking out the larger history of the Thirty Years War (Kuhn 105).



2.6 Critical Commentary

Scene I

Overview

The play begins in the year 1624, in Dalarna, a province in Sweden. The war has been going on for several years, and the first scene captures the short span of the truce during the Swedish-Polish conflict. The play begins with an ironic exchange between a recruiting officer and a sergeant, who lament the absence of war which, according to them, should continue, because it provides ordinary citizens with a sense of order. The recruiting officer is looking for more soldiers, as the ones in his regiment run away or commit suicide. At this point, Mother Courage enters and gives her “sales pitch” which is a song. Her words, “Boots they will march in till they die!” emphasise the fatalism of the war (Brecht 24). The soldiers ask her for her permit and requisite paperwork to do business during the war. As she does not have any legitimate papers authorizing her trade, the recruiting officers ask her to introduce her children. She starts introducing them one by one. All three of her children have been fathered by different men. The banter with the Sergeant enrages Eilif, her eldest son, who is supposed to be the bravest of them all.

Looking at Mother Courage’s sons, the Recruiting Officer (who presumably gets a commission on each of his recruits) asks why her sons, both with a good physique, have not enlisted in the army. To this Mother Courage gets defensive, flatly refusing to let either of her sons get recruited. She is very clear about the fact that soldiers are destined to die at war. In order to avoid the argument, and to ward off the possibility of her sons being enlisted in the army, she takes out a knife to scare the officers. Initially, the Sergeant and recruiting officer try to reason with her, suggesting that the war has bestowed so much on her, that she should contribute something to the war as well. However, Mother Courage disagrees, and retorts that the Sergeant too, is destined to have a short life span. She claims that she can foretell the future, and starts a charade, folding a chit with a black cross and putting it with blank pieces of paper. The Sergeant picks the one with a cross, suggesting that he is going to be killed in the war. However, this demonstration does not end here. The Sergeant asks both her sons to pick a chit each. Ironically, each of her children also choose black crosses, indicating that they too will die in war as soldiers. To Mother Courage’s dismay, even the slip that Katrin chooses has a black cross on it, indicating that Mother Courage is going to lose all her children to war. What starts as a deceitful charade, meant to fool the officers, ends on a serious note for her, as she is forced to confront the danger of being in a war zone.



The conversation continues, and the two army men distract Mother Courage by starting to bargain over a belt that the Sergeant wants to purchase from her. As the two get busy, the recruiting officer offers to take Eilif for a drink and goes away with him. Katrin tries to draw her mother's attention, but being speech-impaired, she can only make a few grunting noises, and jump up and down from the wagon. All this while Mother Courage is busy with the bargaining. After selling the belt to the Sergeant, she realizes that Eilif has been taken away by the recruiting officer, leaving her disconcerted and shocked. The scene ends with the Sergeant saying that the War will take something from you, if you live off the war. The contradiction between Mother Courage's aspirations and intentions become clear: she will not be able to maintain her family with profits from war while keeping them safely out of it.

Analysis

This ironic exchange between the two army men establishes for the audience that the war has been normalized by the army, to the extent that they see peace as abnormal. The recruiting officer is clearly unable to recruit enough people for the war. He mentions that the men he recruits are unfit to be soldiers,

I do get my hands on some character
and squint at him so I don't notice he's pigeon chested
and has varicose veins. I get him drunk and
relaxed, he signs on the dotted line. (23)

If the physically unhealthy men are being recruited for the war, it indicates that the war is already being fought at a disadvantage.

Mother Courage's wagon also plays an important part throughout the play, changing shape as the play progresses. In the early scenes it's a wagon, with ample space, and with enough merchandise on it. Later, as the play progress it becomes only a cart, indicating the change in the family's financial standing. While all her children are fathered by different men, there is confusion about their real parentage. Eilif's father seems to have a Finnish name, but Eilif remembers him as a French man. Similarly, Swiss cheese had a Swiss father, but he has inherited the qualities of a Hungarian man, Feyos, and is named after him as well. While these details may go unnoticed by viewers, many some scholars suggest that this could be a subtle attack on Hitler's theory of racial purity (Chatterjee 85). Critics also question the maternal qualities of Mother Courage. Irrespective of her profiteering and dependence on the war, Mother Courage is very firm about not sending her sons to the war front. She is well aware that soldiers at the lowest rung of the



hierarchy, are at risk of death. Yet, throughout the play, her instinct to make a profit gets in the way of caring for her children.

Notice the names given by Brecht to the various characters. Mother Courage is never called by her real name. She gets her name because she had once taken her wagon to sell bread at a war front. She admits that even at that time, her sole concern was that the bread was getting mouldy. Financial interest and her business acumen is, in many ways, her tragic flaw. The recruiting officer and Sergeant shrewdly manipulate her instincts. When they are unable to convince her, they distract her by offering to buy her goods, so that the recruiting officer gets a chance to persuade her son to enlist in the army.

Scene II

Overview

Two years have passed and now Mother Courage is in Poland, with the Swedish army. The war is still going on, and for Mother Courage, this is an apt time to make enough profit. Sweden has taken over Poland, and the Swedish soldiers are in need of supplies, as there is serious scarcity of resources in the city.

The scene begins, with Mother Courage standing next to the tent of the Commander, where his cook is trying to strike a bargain with her. The Cook and Mother Courage are arguing over the price of a capon (a large fattened chicken). While they are not able to reach a compromise, Mother Courage describes the situation of the ordinary peasants in the province. She claims that people have been chasing after rats and even boiled leather would be a delicacy for the common people as there is an extreme shortage of goods during these times. While they are still arguing, Mother Courage overhears a conversation in the next tent and immediately recognizes that it is the voice of her son Eilif.

Eilif, now a soldier, is in a conversation with the Sergeant about a raid he conducted on the peasants and killed them. He brags about how he found their hidden oxen, deceived them that he is going to purchase from them, and in a weak moment, killed several of them. A Chaplain is also accompanying them, and he disapproves of the killings. However, by now, he too has become cynical about the war, and says that Christian adages like “Love thy neighbour” are all meant for times when people have food to eat and amidst war, such morality need not apply. As she hears about Eilif’s adventure, Mother Courage suddenly gets angry and delivers a short monologue about the need for good leadership in the army.

The scene ends with a song where Mother Courage sings The Parable of a Fishwife warning a soldier not to go into the sea, but the soldier does not listen and drowns. When



the song ends, Eilif realizes that his mother is in the kitchen and warmly meets her. After brief exchange Mother Courage informs Eilif (and the audience) that his brother Swiss Cheese is also in the army, but he is not on the trenches. To her relief, he is a paymaster (an official who is responsible for payment of wages). She slaps Eilif, casually reprimanding him for putting himself in danger.

Analysis

Mother Courage's comments about the severity of the situation during the war seem to be an exaggeration. Nevertheless, she points to the fact that it is the common people who suffer during war. Historical records show that the thirty years war exacerbated epidemics and starvation among civilian populations. Eilif's story of luring the peasants for the price of the oxen is also noteworthy. As the peasants are left with little or nothing to eat, the chance to sell their hidden oxen is enough to entice them. However, Eilif kills the peasants with absolutely no cognisance of the morality of his action. His actions are in fact praised by the Commander, who compares him to Caesar, "you have the makings of a Caesar" (38). Like Eilif, he has lost his moral compass and does not think of the gravity of such a brutal killing of the innocent civilians. Even though Mother Courage sees Eilif as intelligent as well as brave, this action exhibits the traits and the cunning of a street fighter. As Thomson describes him, "He is a uniformed mugger, licensed by war to round off robbery with murder, and it is evidence of Mother Courage's limited understanding that she cannot entirely suppress pride in him" (Thomson 31).

Like the previous scene, this scene too, points to the atrocities of the war. Mother Courage emphasizes that the demand for virtue is both flawed and hypocritical, as insisting on the moral integrity of the powerless often exposes the inefficiency and corruption of those in positions of authority.

All virtues which a
well-regulated country with a good king or a good
general wouldn't need. In a good country virtues
wouldn't be necessary. Everybody could be quite
ordinary, middling, and, for all I care, cowards. (39)

Mother Courage does realize that the need for brave and courageous soldiers is a sign of poor leadership in the army, nevertheless, she fails to accept that Eilif's collaboration in wartime atrocities goes against his own interests.

**Check Your Progress**

- i) What is epic theatre?
- ii) Why does Mother Courage pretend that she can predict the future?
- iii) How does Mother Courage lose Eilif?
- iv) What is the significance of the Parable of the Fishwife?

Scene III**Overview**

One of the longest, and most eventful scenes of the play, the title of Scene III itself indicates that Mother Courage's younger son, Swiss Cheese is going to die. The scene opens three years after the previous one, and the war has continued. Mother Courage folds laundry on a clothesline, and tries to strike a deal with an officer who wants to sell her a bag of bullets, so that he can buy more alcohol. Courage chastises the army man for selling off the bullets for profit, even while the soldiers in the regiment would not have anything to fight with. The officer suggests that she can sell the bullets to the other regiment, as they are out of bullets. Her younger son, Swiss Cheese accompanies them, as does a young sex worker by the name Yvette Pottier. In a quick conversation with Swiss Cheese, Mother Courage reminds him that he has been recruited by the army because he is so honest and simple (or naïve) that he will never think of stealing anything from the army. She also remarks that new countries have joined the war, making it possible for her business to flourish.

We are now introduced to Yvette's story as well: jilted by her lover who was a Dutch Cook, Yvette came to the war front following him. However, as she has no other means to support herself, she now works as a prostitute, but soldiers avoid her.

Meanwhile, Mother Courage does not want Katrin to listen to Yvette's story as she hopes Katrin gets married when the war ends. However, Katrin does try on Yvette's shoes in the scene symbolising her repressed sexuality. The Cook and the Chaplain enter, with a message from Eilif that he wants some money. As the three discuss the war, the darker side of the war gets exposed. Both, Mother Courage and the Cook are aware that the war will only serve the profiteering motives of people in power. While the Chaplain seems to justify war on religious lines, his claims lack conviction.

There is a sudden attack by a Christian army, and everyone runs for cover: the Cook leaves; Mother Courage smears dirt on Katrin's face to protect her from the soldiers; the Chaplain, being a Protestant cleric hides his identity and Courage reluctantly lends him a



cloak, and they frantically also take off the Swedish flag from their wagon. At this point, Swiss Cheese enters with a cashbox in hand, that he is saving from the enemy, and hides it in the wagon. As three more days pass, Swiss Cheese becomes restless, thinking that his regiment would be looking for him, so, at a crucial moment, when his mother is away, he decides to hide the cashbox near the river, so that he can save it from the Christian Army and hand it over to his regiment when the right time comes. While this intention is honest, his decision to move the cashbox is a foolish one, as spies of the enemy camp are keeping an eye on him. Even as he carries the cashbox away from the wagon, Katrin tries to convey to him that he is in danger, but Swiss Cheese does not take the hints, and is eventually caught by the enemy camp. All this while, Mother Courage had been away to buy a Catholic flag and some meat. As she returns, two soldiers drag Swiss Cheese, asking him about the hidden cashbox. The soldier asks Swiss Cheese if he knows Mother Courage, but both Mother Courage and Swiss Cheese have to pretend that they do not know each other.

As her son is taken away, Mother Courage tries her best to save him from getting hanged. With the help of Yvette, who is now sleeping with one of the Sergeants of the Catholic Army, Mother Courage tries to procure money for Swiss Cheese's ransom. They decide to sell their wagon to the Sergeant, who would offer money for the ransom. Mother Courage initially plans to use the money from Swiss Cheese's cashbox to retrieve her loss. However, she later gets to know that Swiss Cheese, under torture and duress, has revealed the location of the cash box to the enemy camp. The only choice that Mother Courage has now, is to either give up her business or her son. Though she knows that time is very crucial, she continues to haggle on the amount of the ransom, which finally costs the life of her son. They hear the sound of drums rolling, and it is an indication of the execution of her honest and naive son.

Analysis

In the beginning of the scene the use of the cannon to hang laundry, correctly depicts the reducing alertness of the Swedish Army. They are taken by complete surprise as they are overtaken by the Catholic soldiers as the scene progresses. Mother Courage is happy that more countries are joining the war. However, she does not realise that this development would cause the war to be more severe, as now, both her sons are in the army.

Swiss Cheese's devotion to his honesty is so extreme that it gets in the way of clear judgement. His mother knows and warns him not to "overdo" his sense of honesty (52). This act of trying to return the cashbox is such an act of honesty (and foolishness), that causes him, and his mother to be dishonest at another crucial time, in the same Scene, when they have to lie to the Christian soldiers that they don't know each other.



It is interesting to note that even though this is ostensibly a religious war, religious affiliation does not matter much to the soldiers, or to Mother Courage. Even though their army has been overtaken by the opposing forces, she can simply change the wagon flag to switch alliances. She also affirms that her religious affiliation has never got into the way of her business.

The exchange between the Chaplain, the Cook and Mother Courage about the war is also noteworthy because both the Cook and Mother Courage know that common civilians are only harmed in war. While the Cook talks about the increased taxes, Mother Courage remarks:

Who's defeated? The defeats and victories
of the fellows at the top aren't always defeats
and victories for the fellows at the bottom (52).

This scene highlights Mother Courage's character. Despite her indecisiveness, and delay in making the final decision, she is restless to get a bargain fixed through Yvette. She does not have a problem with paying two hundred guilders as ransom to save her son, as she assumes that access to the cashbox will help her retrieve her loss. It's only when she realizes that she has to choose between her son and her livelihood, that she starts rethinking her decision to buy Swiss Cheese's freedom. This dilemma too, is because she still has to care for Kattrin, who is dependent upon her.

Swiss Cheese clearly lacks the alertness that is innate to his mother. On the other hand, Mother Courage's tendency look for opportunities even in the face of adversity causes her tremendous loss. Even when her eldest son, Eilif is taken by the army officer, she is busy bargaining the price of a belt. Both times, her strength gets in the way of her intentions for her sons.

Brecht's anti-war commentary is at its height in this scene as war is now being won by the opposing forces. Despite this change in the order, however, Mother Courage's business will expand and thrive as the war continues, and the Christians, in need of supplies, will be forced to buy from Mother Courage, despite different political and religious affiliations. Brecht makes a sharp critique of religion and religious war, indicating that religion fails to deliver true justice to people, as any religious reasoning for the war is only a façade.

Scene IV

Overview

Mother Courage goes to an officer's tent, to report the ransacking of her wagon. Her cart has been vandalized, and she has been charged with a fine as well. As she awaits the



officer, the clerk warns her not to go ahead with the complaint. In the meantime, a young soldier furiously enters, shortly followed by an old soldier. The young soldier complains that the captain has taken away the money, and squandered it. The older soldier advises him to stay calm, but the young soldier continues, aggressively swearing, and attempting to lodge the complaint. Mother Courage sings the song of Capitulation, telling her own story, about how she changed from being extremely idealistic about her beliefs and quick to protest, but as she grew older, she realized that she too, had become used to the oppression, thereby imparting the lesson of capitulation. She tells the young soldier to wait and complain, only when the anger is so big that he will not have to choose capitulation as a recourse to his own survival. When the clerk asks Mother Courage to finally come inside to make the complaint, she departs, having decided not to go ahead with it.

Analysis

This scene doesn't just bring to light the depth of Courage's ways of thinking, but is also a commentary on normalization of oppression. Courage is not just advising capitulation because of lack of will power. So oppressive is the system, that a single person protesting would never make a difference. It is also interesting to see that the younger soldier is livid with anger, but the older soldier is a lot more pragmatic, and practical. Even though not protesting feels like a short-term goal over long term wellbeing, Mother Courage's self-realization comes when she notices the situation of the young soldier, and decides, that no act of rebellion will ever make a difference unless it is sustained and forceful. Sadly, people who have to earn and make a living, do not have the luxury to do so. Mother Courage's final decision to return is indicative of this wisdom, that is as yet inaccessible to the young soldier. This scene, however brief, is considered as one of the most significant by many scholars, as it describes the journey of Mother Courage, who has changed from being a youthful idealist to a cynical realist. Eric Bentley writes, "We discover that Mother Courage is not a happy Machiavellian, boasting of her realism as an achievement. We find that she is deeply ashamed. And in finding this, we discover in Courage the mother of those two roaring idealists (not to say again: martyrs) Swiss Cheese and Kattrin" (Bentley 17).

Scene V

Overview

Two more years pass, and Mother Courage is now selling more supplies to soldiers. The caption to the scene tells us that the war has covered a wide territory, and Mother Courage has now moved across Poland, Moravia, Bavaria, and Italy. The most recent development in the war is General Tilly's (a Catholic General) siege of Magdeburg. The soldiers are



plundering the town. Mother Courage refuses to give liquor to a soldier who cannot pay. This soldier is carrying a fur coat, most probably looted from the town. Soldiers are shown to be misusing their power yet another time.

The Chaplain asks Mother Courage for bandages, as a peasant's family has been injured while taking care of their farm. Courage, despite seeing their plight refuses to help, at which the Chaplain tears off some of the shirts meant for the soldiers into pieces so as to make bandages out of them. Kattrín is also desperate to help people in need and threatens her mother with a plank of wood. Just then, she hears the cries of a baby, and she runs inside the house to save the child. Once back, Kattrín tends to the baby in her lap, trying to sing her a lullaby. Despite the violence surrounding her, Mother Courage's sole concern remains her profit. As she laments the loss of the shirts, she snatches away the fur coat from the drunk soldier.

Analysis

It is interesting to note how Mother Courage has changed affiliation smoothly from Protestant to Christian Camp without any hesitation. While brief, the scene is very significant for Brecht's style of depicting historical events. The scene is set in the year 1631, when General Tilly attacked the Protestant city of Magdeburg, causing the worst massacre of the war. This remains one of the most cited events in the history of the Thirty Years War. Yet, Brecht defamiliarizes his audiences by departing from conventional modes of history telling. Tilly's victory and his funeral in the next scene are a mere backdrop to the events happening in the lives of common people. This is another way of retelling history from the perspective of the common man, or the bourgeois, a key element in Brechtian Marxist politics.

Kattrín's repressed desire for motherhood is highlighted at this point, too, when she tries to sing a lullaby to the child whom she has saved. From this point onwards, Kattrín's role in the play gains importance. This event sets the tone for Kattrín's heroic act of saving an entire town, towards the end of the play.

Scene VI

Overview

Set in 1632, the context for this scene is Tilly's funeral. However, just like the previous scene, this is only a backdrop to the events happening in the lives of the common people. Tilly is now martyred at war, and Courage casually informs the audience about the circumstances that caused his death. Due to a lack of supplies, there were fewer lamps in his regiment, and, in the thick fog, the general marched in the wrong direction, lead-



ing to his death. His death was, therefore, a consequence of corruption in the army. The Churches have been destroyed, so, at his funeral, there will be no bells to commemorate his death. The soldiers are busy drinking and are not interested in attending his funeral.

Mother Courage is now rich and is enjoying her new wealth, though she is worried that if the war ends, it will be the end of her business. Her only motive now is, to decide whether to invest more in her merchandise; she does not care about the social or ethical issues of the war. She discusses the war with the Chaplain, and both seem convinced that the war may not end at all. As this conversation goes on, Katrin, who, up until now was hoping for the war to end, gets agitated. The revelation that the war may never end is a shock to her, as she yearns for marriage, motherhood, and companionship. She stares at the Chaplain and then runs out, but her mother directs her to get some supplies instead. Mother Courage warns her that soldiers on the way might attempt to take away her goods, so she should put up a good fight. As Katrin leaves, Courage starts smoking a pipe, and the Chaplain notices that it is the same pipe that was left by the Cook, indicating that the Cook and Mother Courage may have a closer, perhaps a sexual relationship. Here, the Chaplain, too, subtly indicates his interest that is dismissed by Mother Courage, firmly and ironically stating that her only goal, now, is to get her children through the war, a goal which she will not be able to achieve.

As Katrin returns, they realize that she has been assaulted guarding her merchandise from rioting soldiers, and has got a scar on her face as a result. This is the final blow to the chances of her ever getting a decent companion. As Courage is nursing her wound back, she offers Katrin Yvette's red boots, which she rejects and crawls into the cart, indicating her resignation to her fate. Courage informs the Chaplain that Katrin's speech impairment is the result of an assault early in her childhood, "A soldier stuck something in her mouth when she was little" (81). Having failed to keep her children safe during the war, Courage, curses the war, the only time in the entire play.

Analysis

While Mother Courage shows a hint of remorse at the general's death, as it may end the war, the Chaplain is entirely unfazed. He is convinced that no general's death would matter, as the Pope and the Emperor would ensure that the war continues one way or another. No matter how heroic, a general's death is therefore inconsequential, "Don't be childish, they grow on trees. There are always heroes" (75). As pointed out earlier, this is intrinsic to Brecht's philosophy of history and narrativization. This is his way of re-writing important historical episodes from the point of view of the bourgeois. General Tilly's funeral is registered as a minor event in the episode about Katrin's mugging. This scene



also offers a rich commentary on the normalization of violence. For Mother Courage and the Chaplain, the war is a necessity. In fact, the Chaplain offers a very mundane everyday analogy to comment on the inevitability of war “What happens to the hole when the cheese is gone?” indicating that people would not understand peace, if it were not for war (76).

Scene VII

Overview

Unlike the previous scene, where Mother Courage is visibly distraught after the attack on Katrin, and curses the war, this scene begins with a rejoicing exclamation, “I won’t let you spoil the war for me” (82). This is one of the shortest scenes in the play; the idea here is to show how Mother Courage has prospered through these times. She starts wearing a necklace of silver coins and rings on her fingers. Brecht wants to highlight how the previous scenes have seemingly left no impact on her.

Analysis

The entire scene is, in a way, an antithesis of the previous scene. Brecht dispels the notion that Mother Courage is unhappy with the war. This, again, is one of the devices used by the playwright to make the audience critically engage with the play. This brings to the fore, Mother Courage’s overall philosophy. She looks at war as a provider, and peace as a disruption. Further, she also iterates that staying at one place is harmful: “Those who stay at home are the first to go” (82). At the end of the play, even after losing everything, Mother Courage will move on, in search of a better business opportunity.

Scene VIII

Overview

As more time passes, the war continues, and the scene begins with two peasants, a mother and a son attempting to sell Mother Courage bedding belonging to the father because they have nothing to eat. Suddenly, there is the sound of bells, and some voices are heard, announcing that peace has been restored, as the Swedish king has been killed. On hearing this news, the old woman faints but, her son wakes her up and they both leave.

As Mother Courage finds out more about the announcement, she learns that it has been three months since peace was restored, but the news took very long to reach them. While this is good news for the peasants like the ones we see in the beginning of the scene, for Courage, this is not a happy moment. She has made several purchases, which, she fears, will go waste now as the people will not buy her goods anymore. However, she does feel hopeful about seeing her son Eilif again. On learning, that peace has been restored, the Chaplain wants to come in his religious robes like before, and Mother Courage cautions



him to confirm whether peace has been restored for real, otherwise he stands the risk of being punished. At this moment the Cook enters, looking a lot more worn out than in the previous scenes. Since the Cook was employed by the commander of Eilif's regiment, Mother Courage hopes to see her son Eilif again. Perhaps the announcement of the war coming to an end led to the termination of his duties as the Commander's Cook. He has not been paid for a long time, and with a severe shortage of raw materials, he is forced to work with very little. He remains unpaid and insulted. As the Cook and Mother Courage discuss the situation, the Chaplain enters again, this time in his religious clothing of a Protestant cleric. With his religious authority back, he starts abusing the Cook as well as Mother Courage, calling her a "hyena of the battlefield" (87).

Realizing that her supplies will go waste, Mother Courage decides to sell her goods without losing any time. At this point, Yvette enters, looking much older and fatter than before. She has gained riches by marrying an older Colonel and inheriting his wealth. On seeing the Cook, she realizes that he is the same ex-lover who had abandoned her, and this starts a heated exchange between the Cook and Yvette. Yvette warns Mother Courage about the Cook and tells her to beware of him. As Mother Courage has now decided to quickly sell her goods, she leaves immediately, along with Yvette. However, as she is hopeful to see Eilif once again, she asks the Chaplain and the Cook to offer Eilif some brandy in case he comes back.

Once she leaves, Eilif is seen entering with his hands tied, escorted by soldiers. He is there to meet Mother Courage for one last time before he is given the death penalty, as he has committed the crime of killing peasants during peacetime. He has been allowed one last meeting with his mother, but since Mother Courage has left, this opportunity of meeting her son for the last time is completely lost. The Cook and the Chaplain ask what they should tell Mother Courage, and Eilif asks the two not to tell her anything at all:

CHAPLAIN: What shall we tell your mother?

EILIF: Tell her it was no different. Tell her it was the same. Oh, tell her nothing (92).

As Eilif leaves, the Chaplain follows him, hoping to offer prayers in his last moments. When Mother Courage returns, she asks for Eilif, but as directed by Eilif, the Cook hides the information about his death sentence, and she continues to assume that Eilif is alive.

Analysis

Scene VIII fits Brecht's description of Epic theatre. The audience is constantly made to feel the irony of the whole situation. The characters are hardly able to distinguish between



war and peace. The commentary on the uncertainty about the war getting over is poignant, as the people on the periphery have no way of knowing about the political situation at the centre. This irony is further heightened as that the war returns once again in no time, and this news too, like the news of the restoration of peace, reaches the civilians two days late. The arbitrariness of the war is thus highlighted, making us wonder about the plight of the common people.

The banter between the Cook and the Chaplain is significant, as both the men want favours of Mother Courage, as they depend on her as a “feedbag” (Thomson 49). However, she chooses the Cook, and this marks the quiet exit of the Chaplain. The audience does not see him again.

When peace is declared at the beginning of the scene, Katrin, who has been waiting for peace in the hope of companionship gives no reaction, “She won’t come out. Peace is nothing to her, it was too long coming” (85). Here, Mother Courage also says that the scar on Katrin’s face is now hardly visible, but she feels that people stare at her. The wound has a deep, psychological impact on Katrin. She has now lost hope of ever living the life she had always wanted.

Mother Courage’s business always distracts her from calamities that befall her children. Even though she does not have a direct role to play in any of the children’s death, her presence with the children would have made an enormous difference to protect them. The Chaplain’s exit from the play at this point further brings to light the nature of his opportunism. Now that he cannot profit from the war, he immediately goes back to his other perhaps, parasitic status, of offering prayers for the dying. Even though Eilif does not want him to come along, the Chaplain still follows him, looking to find money for his religious services.

What was seen as an act of bravery during war, is seen as an unlawful, punishable offense now. Eilif’s is Mother Courage’s bravest son, but his bravery seldom gets ahead of bullying. A similar act of violence was rewarded earlier, and he was even compared to Caesar in Scene II (38). Now he is being punished with a death sentence.

Check Your Progress

- i) Why is Mother Courage unable to save Swiss Cheese?
- ii) What does “The Song of the Great Capitulation” represent?
- iii) Why does Katrin get dejected after hearing that the way may never end?
- iv) Why is Eilif punished? Why is he unable to meet his mother in his last moments?



Scene IX

Overview

Many more years pass. It has now been seventeen years since the war has been going on, and the scene establishes that everyone is now tired of the war. Unlike the earlier time, when some people had enough money to purchase goods from Mother Courage, now everyone is starving, Mother Courage exclaims, “In Pomerania I hear the villagers have been eating their younger children. Nuns have been caught committing robbery” (96).

Mother Courage’s business is now failing, and she, along with the Cook and Katrin, is forced to beg for food. The Cook reveals to Mother Courage that he would like to take her to Utrecht, where his aunt has left him a small inn. Mother Courage agrees to accompany him, believing that she will be able to save Katrin from the war. The Cook clarifies that Katrin cannot accompany them. Despite the inn being too small for people to depend on it, he was still willing to take Mother Courage with him, as she would be a helping hand but, Katrin would be a liability. In addition to this, Katrin’s scar is another reason for his decision, “I can’t have her in the inn. Customers don’t like having something like that always before their eyes. You can’t blame them” (97).

They sing the Song of Solomon, mentioning great men like Solomon, Julius Caesar, Socrates, and Saint Martin, who suffered on account of their virtues. In Mother Courage’s world, therefore, virtue is never rewarded. Both her sons die on account of their virtues. Her daughter will also see a tragic end in the next scene. While the Cook decides to leave, Mother Courage, despite giving an honest thought to the idea of leaving decides not to abandon Katrin. As she returns to the cart, Katrin takes out her bundle of clothes, intending to run away. She has heard the conversation between her mother and the Cook, and, heartbroken, she aligns Mother Courage’s skirt with his trousers, indicating their sexual relationship, and her mute resignation to the same. However, Mother Courage tells her that she is not going anywhere. She throws the Cook’s clothes out of the cart. The Cook sees this, and the scene ends here.

Analysis

The Song of Solomon is one of the most important songs in the play. Each of the figures in the song corresponds to one of the children: Eilif has the courage of Caesar, Swiss Cheese has the honesty of Socrates, and Katrin has the kindness of St Martin. Just like the heroes, all three children die because of their virtues too. Mother Courage has also critiqued virtue in Scene II, where she says that virtues are needed by the people when there is an irresponsible leadership at the top:

When a general or a king is stupid and leads his soldiers
into a trap, they need this virtue of courage.



When he's tightfisted and hasn't enough soldiers, the
few he does have need the heroism of Hercules
another virtue. (39)

The war is now almost impossible to survive, with barely any means to live by and the Cook wants the support of Mother Courage, perhaps because of her sharp business acumen, but he refuses to take Katrin. He does not try to coverup the true reasons for wanting to leave Katrin behind, citing her scar as the second reason for deserting her. The reference to the scar (visible or invisible) reminds us that Katrin is the ultimate symbol of wartime atrocities on women. Mother Courage also mentions Katrin's inability to survive on her own. "Cook, how could she pull the wagon by herself? The war frightens her. She can't bear it" (97). However, once she is back with Katrin, she tells her that she is back only for the wagon (101). Katrin, and Mother Courage are the only ones left on stage.

Scene X

Overview

It is 1635 now, and Mother Courage and Katrin are in Germany. As they are moving, they hear music coming from inside a house. The residents are singing a song about home, and, revel in the comfort of a warm home amidst the chaos. The scene is brief and only the song plays, while Mother Courage and Katrin stop to listen.

Our farmhouse gives us shelter.

The winter's in a hurry

But we've no cause to worry.

We are warm

In the midst of the storm! (102)

Analysis

The scene brings to the fore, the symbolic relationship between the powerful and the marginalized. There is a glaring disparity between the circumstances of Mother Courage and the happy residents of the house. Even though there is poverty all across, the people in the house are happy about their comforts, and remain indifferent to the hardships faced by those outside.

Scene XI

Overview

It is now 1636, and they are in the Protestant town of Halle. The cart now stands near a peasant's house. Katrin is therefore, alone. An army of Christian soldiers suddenly attacks



the peasants. They want to go further and ransack the town. Although the peasants are initially unwilling to reveal the location of the town, they are intimidated and eventually give in, agreeing to show the way to the nearby town. Kattrin is among these peasants, as Mother Courage is once again absent, off buying cheap goods from shopkeepers.

Once the soldiers are away, the peasant women, pray for their family members in the nearby town. They reiterate that they couldn't do anything to save the people of the town from being attacked. All townspeople are sleeping and no one can alert them for fear of the Christian soldiers. The peasants pray to God, believing that nothing can be done to save the town from being sieged. As a peasant's wife prays for the little children in her family, Kattrin rises to action and immediately takes the drum from her cart, climbs the roof, and starts to beat the drum so as to alert the townspeople.

Everyone tries to take her down from the roof. The peasants try to place a ladder, to force her to get down, but she pulls it to the roof. They threaten to stone her, but she keeps drumming. The noise draws the soldiers back, who desperately try to stop her or drown out the sound of her drum. In their frenzy, they even begin chopping wood to avoid arousing suspicion among the townspeople. However, none of their efforts succeed, and Kattrin beats the drum even more furiously. In frustration, the Lieutenant finally orders her to be shot. This is her final act of sacrifice to save the children of the other town. However, this act of benevolence marks her death.

Analysis

Kattrin's final act of sacrifice also points to the irony of the war. The soldiers, in an attempt to reach her start chopping wood, and later make even more noise, thus alerting the people with their own actions. Like her two brothers, Kattrin dies because of her dominant virtue of kindness and motherhood. It does not go unnoticed that this final act of kindness is for the unseen children in the town. The chaos that unfolds as Kattrin drums is significant, as no threat, warning, or bribe can sway her. Even when the soldiers kick the cart to intimidate her, she remains defiant and refuses to back down. This is an act of true courage, something that Mother Courage, despite her name, is never able to demonstrate. Critics thus view Kattrin as the ultimate mother figure in the play. "Mother Courage's behaviour suggests a self-centred, and self-regarding mother-love confined to her own children; Kattrin's more universal mother-love embraces all children — peasant and bourgeois, in country and town, and those seen as well as unseen." (Chatterjee Ivi). The entire action takes place when Mother Courage is away, once again, chasing a short-term business goal.



Scene XII

Overview

In the final scene of the play, Mother Courage sings a lullaby to the dead body of Katrin. She still erroneously believes that her son Eilif is alive. In the final climax, however, she goes out with the soldiers still looking for a way to survive, now without her children, but still dragging her cart with her.

Analysis

Mother Courage has finally lost all her three children, and all die when she is away because of work. Yet, she seems to be unfazed, whether for the need to survive or simply because it is her second nature to move on for business. In the beginning of the play, Mother Courage is with her three children, her two grown up sons are pulling her wagon, she is managing a relatively profitable business. The closing scene of the play is exactly its opposite: Mother Courage is alone, on her own, her three children have all died because of the war and the decisions that she has made. Her wagon is now a threadbare cart, and she pulls it alone as she struggles to find strength through all these years of war. Yet, she goes off, in search of the next best opportunity, as she refuses to learn anything from her journey. In his notes, Brecht highlights this very refusal to learn anything as the flaw that completely undoes Mother Courage. Some critics see this character trait of Mother Courage as a sign of her indomitability: Eric Bentley writes:

Mother Courage is *essentially courageous*. . . . On she marches with her wagon after all that has happened, a symbol of the way humanity itself goes on its way after all that has happened, *if* it can find the courage. And after all we don't have to wait for the final scene to learn that we have to deal with a woman of considerable toughness and resilience (Bentley 9).

The final scene thus completes the tragedy of Mother Courage. The soldier's song echoes the essence of war, ". . . And though it last three generations, We shall get nothing out of it" (111).

Check Your Progress

- i) Why does Mother Courage part ways with the Cook?
- ii) What does "The Song of the Great Souls of this Earth" signify?
- iii) Why is Mother Courage unable to save any of her children?
- iv) What is the significance of Katrin's sacrifice at the end of the play?



2.7 Characters

Mother Courage

The titular character, Mother Courage, is a tradeswoman who makes money by selling essential items to soldiers at war. Her real name, Anna Fierling is revealed in the beginning of the play. It is only the Cook who addresses her by name. She has two sons, Eilif and Swiss Cheese and a mute daughter, Katrin all fathered by different men, and belonging to different nationalities. Her fatal trait is her business instinct.

Brecht offers a critique of war through her character. By the end of the play, even though she has lost all of her children, she goes back to continue with the business that has tragically led to the death of all her children. Through her character, Brecht offers a serious commentary on the futility and injustice of war, and capitalism. Brecht wanted to paint Mother Courage as a truly unsympathetic character, who learns nothing from the war. The end of the play significantly draws her as a selfish person who is constantly preoccupied by short-term, immediate gain. However, many critics argue that Mother Courage has the depth of a great tragic figure. She has no choice, but to suffer, endure and move on. She is thus, a complex figure which can be seen as a human embodiment of different roles put together. She is intelligent, but blind; self-regarding, but unselfish; indomitable, yet cowardly (Chatterjee lxvi). Even though she often sides with war-mongers, and war often makes her happy (as seen in Scene VII), she is bound by her personal duty of motherhood, and tries sincerely to save her children, but ultimately fails.

Katrin

Katrin is the mute daughter of Mother Courage. As she is speech impaired, due to a childhood assault, she communicates only through gestures and grunting noises. She represents the brutality of war, especially on innocent people and women. While her mother too, aspires to get her married, these hopes are quashed as she is attacked by soldiers and her face is scarred, virtually jeopardizing her chances of getting married, or having children. She, however, turns out to be one of the most compassionate and courageous characters of the play, saving many lives while sacrificing her own. She dreams of escaping war and living a simple, free life, but that dream never comes to fruition. Her death marks the absolute futility and injustice of war.

Eilif

Eilif is the eldest son of Mother Courage. He is brutish, violent, quick on his feet, and thinks clearly in the face of adversity. During the war, when confronted with peasants, he is able to manipulate them, choosing a weak moment to rob, and then murder them



as well. Feeling no remorse for his actions, he represents the aggression and brutality of war, “Tires you out, skinning peasants. Gives you an appetite” (Brecht 34). He enjoys the advantage that power gives him, and this selfish act of bravado and aggression is rewarded by his commander. However, once the war ends, a similar act of brutish, ill-thought violence is deemed unpardonable, and he is given the death sentence. The favourite of his mother, Eilif seeks her in his final moments, perhaps believing that she would be able to save him, but he is unable to meet her. He declines to pass any information to her, and Mother Courage remains ignorant of his death throughout the rest of the play.

Swiss Cheese

Swiss Cheese is the younger son of Mother Courage. He is honest and loyal to the point of delusion and stupidity. He becomes a paymaster in the army, but bound by his tremendous sense of duty and loyalty, he wants to return the army cashbox to his regiment, even when they have already been taken over by the opposing forces. This goes against the advice of his mother, making him the first of Mother Courage’s children to die.

Swiss Cheese’s virtue is honesty, which makes him lose his sense of self-preservation. He is not selective in his display of honesty, and he is equally honest with everyone, until it reaches the point where he is captured by the Christian soldiers.

Cook

The Cook is Dutch, first introduced as a cook to the Commander of Eilif’s regiment. He was also the lover of Yvette Pottier and abandoned her, but he sticks to Mother Courage in the latter half of the play. Towards the end of the play, he parts ways with Mother Courage, to work at his inn in Utrecht.

Chaplain

The Chaplain is a Protestant cleric, who is first seen with Eilif and his Commander. However, he later joins Mother Courage and depends on her for survival. He personifies Brecht’s critique of religion, as he is presented as a hypocrite and cowardly. He competes with the Cook for Mother Courage’s companionship, but gets rejected. Throughout the play he tries, futilely, to provide a religious justification for the war. Nevertheless, just before his final exit from the play, he gives a moralizing sermon to Mother Courage, calling her a “Hyena of the battlefield” (87).

Yvette Pottier

Yvette Pottier is a sex worker who also, like Mother Courage, follows the army for survival. She tells her story in the first half of the play, that she is a jilted lover of a Dutch man, who is later revealed to be the Cook. She marries the elder brother of a sergeant



that she was once sleeping with, and inherits his property becoming rich. She is perhaps the only character who, finally profits in the war.

Recruiting Officer

The recruiting officer is introduced in Scene I as a frustrated army man, looking for cannon fodder. He recruits Eilif, while distracting his mother with the help of the Sergeant.

Sergeant

The Sergeant is introduced in Scene I. Like the Recruiting officer, he is also of the view that war is necessary to bring a sense of order to society.

2.8 Themes

Mother courage as an Anti-war Play

The play offers a strong antiwar commentary. Mother Courage is a war profiteer, as she depends on the war for survival. However, she does not want to sacrifice anything for the war herself. Eilif, her eldest son, is the smartest. He is aggressive, quick on his feet, and courageous, completely swayed by the narrative of war. However, his courage is not the virtue that is useful to him. Just after Mother Courage hears about Eilif's courage, she calls out the bad leadership of the Commanding officers:

MOTHER COURAGE: Because he needs brave soldiers, that's why. If his plan of campaign was any good, why would he need brave soldiers, wouldn't plain, ordinary soldiers do? Whenever there are great virtues, it's a sure sign something's wrong (Brecht 39).

You will also notice that there are no great battle scenes or depictions of war in the play. Despite the heroic victory in Magdeburg, General Tilly dies because there were not enough lamps with his regiment. The play is, thus, a critique of the conventional understanding of war itself, and highlights that war can never benefit anyone. At many points in the play, the characters break into discussions about the ongoing war. Brecht had lived through World War I and wrote the play a little before the outbreak of World War II. He wanted his audience to not simply be moved by the tragedy of Mother Courage, but contextualize these discussions with their times, and critically engage with the themes.

Critique of Capitalism

Brecht was a firm believer in Marxism. Time and again, he points out that the people at the top are unconcerned about the sufferings of the people at the lowest rung of society. At times, Mother Courage is too focussed on making profit to notice that her children are being harmed. Brecht also portrays her as an opportunist, for whom the news that the



war has ended is disappointing. Since she defines herself solely through her work, she is swayed by her desire to make a profit, even at the most crucial moments, irrespective of her children's safety. In his notes, Brecht remarks that this was one of the first large-scale wars waged by capitalist powers in Europe, in the name of religion. He also looked at Hitler's campaign as an indication of the crisis of capitalism in an intensified form (Chatterjee xxxvii).

Critique of Heroism and Virtue

Brecht offers a strong critique of traditional notions of heroism and patriotism, especially through the character of Eilif. What is glorious and commendable in the face of war, is actually illegal and unethical in other circumstances. Eilif's pillaging of the peasants during the war is considered a brave act whereas in reality, it is an act of coercion, wherein he kills the peasants and robs them of their means to survival. As mentioned in the analysis of Scene II, and Scene XI, virtue and bravery do not matter if the leadership is corrupt and selfish. It is interesting that there are no martyrs in the play. While General Tilly sacks Magdeburg in scene V, in the very next scene his funeral is a big disaster, as soldiers are not willing to attend it and the bells won't be tolled either. The Chaplain too says, in Scene VI, that there is never a dearth of war heroes (Brecht 75). The play suggests that war glorifies violence and that true heroism may involve resisting or surviving war, rather than participating in it.

Gender and Power

Brecht's portrayal of women is strong in many of his plays, perhaps owing to collaboration with women writers like Elizabeth Hauptmann. In all respects, Mother Courage's characterization is unconventional and strongly rejects conventions of patriarchy. She is bold, shrewd, quick-witted, and outsmarts some of her male comrades easily. Her masculine traits of calculation, and profiteering often overpower feminine traits of motherhood and nurture. Moreover, Katrin's story is also a strong representation of feminine suffering during the war. Though Katrin emerges as the real hero of war, her suffering should be reviewed through the lens of gender. These two women embody strength and resilience, but they are still ultimately powerless in the face of larger societal forces.

Religion and Hypocrisy

The character of the Chaplain is the primary example of the arbitrariness of religious doctrine in the play. Brecht also chooses the setting of the Thirty Years War, where, religious affiliation, though initially the cause for war, later becomes only a ruse. Here, too, Mother Courage is easily able to switch sides and serve the Christian and Protestant soldiers alike, mainly owing to the fact that it does not matter what she believes in, as long as she keeps providing the soldiers with what they need.



2.9 Summing Up

In this part of the study material, you have read about Bertolt Brecht's iconic play, *Mother Courage and her Children*. The first part of this lesson touches upon and the innovations that are used to defamiliarize the audience so as to educate and inform them. Brecht's theories of epic theatre also throw light on how this play has been produced over the years. The following sections provide a comprehensive analysis and critical commentary of both the play and its context. Brecht's work is explored as a critique of the futility of war, offering a broader perspective on the intersection of war and capitalism, highlighting how systemic societal injustices are often culturally normalized. The discussions about the characters and themes would further enable you to have a thorough understanding of the play and its relevance in Modern European theatre.

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Eugén Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*

Ruchika Bhatia

Structure

- 3.1 *Learning Objectives*
- 3.2 *The Theatre of the Absurd*
- 3.3 *About the Author*
- 3.4 *Influences on Ionesco's Work*
- 3.5 *Rhinoceros: A Study Guide*
- 3.6 *Characterization*
- 3.7 *Important Themes*
- 3.8 *The Language of Rhinoceros*
- 3.9 *Long Answer Questions*
- 3.10 *Works Cited and Further Reading*

3.1 Learning Objectives

The play *Rhinoceros* was first published in French as *Le Rhinocéros* in 1959. It was first performed in Germany in 1960 and in many other cities; bringing its author Ionesco international fame. This study material on *Rhinoceros* includes a brief discussion on the Theatre of the Absurd, a detailed study guide, and analyses of important characters and themes. After going through this study material, you should be able to;

- ◆ Understand the play as a political allegory,
- ◆ Write about the major issues raised by Ionesco, and
- ◆ Formulate your personal perspective on *Rhinoceros*.

The primary motive of this study material is to encourage students to develop their own understanding and critique of several complexities offered by the play.

3.2 The Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd, broadly speaking, refers to a style of writing followed by European playwrights, between 1940 and 1960. It developed as a reaction to the horrors



of World War II and as a rebellion against traditional culture and literature. These writers reflected on the futile human struggle to understand the meaning of existence. Existentialism provided the philosophical underpinning for this theatre. 'God is dead': Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration encapsulated the loss of faith in a benevolent higher power. It opposed the idea of human rationality, an intelligible universe, and the individual's capacity for heroism. The 1940s saw the spread of the ideas of existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who viewed the human being as a reduced entity, existing in isolation and alienation; living a purposeless life. According to Camus, 'absurdity' designated the condition of man in an alien, 'unknown,' and hostile universe. He explained this in his philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942):

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (4)

In 1961, Martin Esslin, a Hungarian-born English drama critic and scholar, published his influential *Theatre of the Absurd*, in which he coined and defined the term:

The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach, by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.

The principal absurdist playwrights were: Samuel Beckett, the most influential writer of the movement, who wrote *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and *Endgame* (1958); Eugéne Ionesco, French playwright of *The Bald Soprano* (1949) and *The Lesson* (1951); Jean Genet, another French playwright who wrote *The Maids* (1947) and *The Balcony* (1956); the English writer Harold Pinter, author of *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Homecoming* (1964), and *Betrayal* (1978); and Edward Albee, known for his *The Zoo Story* (1958) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).

The main features of absurdist drama are suspension of language as a means to communicate meaning, the absence of narrative continuity or sequential events, bizarre scenery or character sketches which shock the readers or viewers, and the use of allegory and metaphors to communicate meaning. These are some of the disruptive techniques followed by the dramatists to break the harmony of the play and unnerve the audience, forcing them to question their relevance.

Language ceases to be a mode of communication; it becomes a tool to obstruct logic or definitive meaning. Ionesco himself was very perturbed with conventional writing



and the way it promotes certainty of meaning. In times of terror and horror, World War I onwards, the possibility of communicating experience was defied. This evasiveness of language and ambiguity of meaning is critical for the Theatre of the Absurd. This particular dodginess of language makes it potentially dangerous, as multiplicity or diversity of meaning is a threat for the absolutist regimes of society. The Theatre of the Absurd aims to represent life as it is; unresolved, imperfect, and conflicting.

Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot* is a superb illustration of form being used to establish a philosophical point. Two men, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for someone named Godot. Doing away with the conventional structure of drama, Beckett's play is static, ending with unresolved questions: who are the two men waiting for, what led to this punishing wait, and whether Godot exists or not. Symbolically, the play demonstrates how struggling for absolute control and coherence in human life is itself pointless. The audience remains glued till the end with the hope that something will happen but it gets thwarted. As the ideals of control, logic, heroism, and significance of human action get subverted, a different picture of loneliness and despair in an unintelligible world emerges.

3.3 About the Author

Eugène Ionesco was a French playwright born on November 26, 1909, in Slatina, Romania. His father was a Romanian Orthodox Christian and his mother was French. He came to Paris, France when he was only a year old and spent his early childhood there. His father returned to Romania in 1916 and is believed to have died in the First World War. However, in 1920 Ionesco learnt that he was alive, had divorced his mother, remarried, and gained custody of the children. Ionesco went to live with him in Romania in 1922, where he attended Saint Sava National School, and later studied French literature at the University of Bucharest. He married Rodica Burileanu in 1936, and in 1938 returned to France with his wife and daughter.

Ionesco started his writing career with poetry and criticism. He wrote *No!* (1934), a satirical pamphlet that criticized prominent Romanian writers and *The Grotesque and Tragic Life of Victor Hugo*; again, a satirical biography of the great French writer Victor Hugo. He started his career in theatre when he was in his forties. His first play *La Cantatrice Chauve* (1948) was first performed with an English title, *The Bald Soprano* in 1950. His early plays were mainly one-act plays and mere absurdist sketches that were critical of the bourgeoisie and conformism of any kind. A few examples are *The Submission* (1950), *The Lesson* (1950), *Salutations* (1950), *The Future is in Eggs* (1951) and *Victims of Duty* (1952). *Rhinoceros* was written in 1959 and performed in Paris, where it



got excellent reviews. Ionesco died in 1994 and the inscription on his tombstone, in true absurdist spirit, reads:

Pray to the I don't-know-who: Jesus Christ, I hope.

3.4 Influences on Ionesco's Work

Ionesco is a significant figure of the French avant-garde theatre. Avant-garde means introduction of new, innovative and experimental ideas in art, music, literature, and theatre, which challenge the old and conventional ways. The French avant-garde was a 20th century phenomenon involving many other significant movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism. Dadaism was an early 20th century artistic movement originating in Zurich, Switzerland around 1916 and then spreading to Berlin, whereas Surrealism was a successor movement. Both were a response to the destruction and horrors of World War I. The damaging effects of World War I fostered a 'negative' art or 'anti-art,' which questioned the rationality and fake values of modern bourgeois society. A few of the key figures of Dadaism were Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray.

Surrealism revolted against all restraints and, instead, advocated free expression and unhindered creativity. It was a breakaway from traditional values, standard morality, and all forms of realistic, conventional art. Some famous surrealists were André Breton, Louis Aragon and the painter Salvador Dali. The writings of Dylan Thomas, Henry Miller, William Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon were also influenced by this movement. The surrealist innovations in writings were; broken syntax, a non-chronological or a seemingly illogical order of events which encouraged free association, and an emphasis on bizarre or shocking images.

Similar features can also be found in Ionesco's writings — where he plays with shocking, disparate images and language; which seem senseless at the surface level but actually challenge and subvert any repressive authoritarian system.

3.5 *Rhinoceros*: A Study Guide

This part of the study guide includes a commentary on the three acts of *Rhinoceros*. Each section has some questions at the end, to test your comprehension of the play. The main issues are briefly discussed in the next two sections. Please remember that this study-guide is meant to draw your attention to those aspects that have engaged commentators and critics over the years. It is up to you to further explore them and develop your own perspective. The page numbers refer to the Worldview edition of *Rhinoceros*. This edition includes a chapter on the critical reception of the play, which you must read.



Act I

The play begins in a provincial town of France, where two friends, Jean and Béranger, meet at a café. Jean is logical; a man of clarity, staunch ideas and opinions, but suffering from excessive pride, whereas Béranger is an indecisive simpleton; a passive, shy man but an alcoholic. Jean rebukes Béranger for being late and coming in a dishevelled state. It is apparent that Béranger has a hangover. His reply highlights his existential dilemma;

BÉRANGER. . . . I'm not made for the work I'm doing . . . every day at the office, eight hours a day — and only three weeks' holiday a year. (5)

The monotony of Béranger's existence is killing his soul, leading him to drink. Béranger notices his colleague Daisy pass by and confides in Jean about his feelings for her. He does not feel worthy of her as he thinks she may be interested in another colleague — Dudard, who is an accomplished, qualified man with a bright future.

The first act has a number of minor characters going about their daily business; the Proprietor of the café, the Waitress, the Grocer, his Wife, the Housewife, an Old Gentleman and the Logician. Notice that they are not given any names or individualized by the author. They represent ordinary people and help create an atmosphere of normal, mundane existence as a backdrop to the appearance of the rhinos.

Suddenly, a rhinoceros is heard charging across the street, rummaging everything and leaving everyone in shock. The rhinoceros does not appear on stage but its presence is conveyed through sounds and the simultaneous, surprised exclamations of the people there. "Oh! a rhinoceros" (6-7). Jean is amazed but Béranger remains unfazed and keeps yawning.

The rhinoceros appears again, killing the Housewife's pet cat. Jean and Béranger get into an argument over the second appearance of the rhinoceros; whether it was the same rhinoceros or a different one, and its species—Asiatic or African. Béranger accuses Jean of being a show-off and Jean calls Béranger "a bluffer and a liar" who has no interest in life and accuses him of being an "Asiatic Mongol" (28). Jean leaves in anger and Béranger feels remorseful.

Parallel to their conversation is the discussion between the Old Gentleman and the Logician. The Logician is trying to explain that a syllogism is one that consists of "a main proposition, a secondary one, and a conclusion," and begins to give examples to the old gentleman:

LOGICIAN. [*to the OLD GENTLEMAN*] Here is an example of syllogism. The cat has four paws. Isidore and Fricot have four paws. Therefore Isidore and Fricot are cats.

OLD GENTLEMAN. [*to the LOGICIAN*] My dog has four paws.

LOGICIAN. [*to the OLD GENTLEMAN*] Then it's a cat. (16)



The conversation between them mocks at reason and logic, at the expense of the character of the Logician. Throughout the first act, the conduct of the minor characters is significant. In the middle of the chaos, after the appearance of the rhinoceroses, the proprietor of the café is worried about the payment for the broken glasses that he will recover from the waitress. The grocer hurries to sell a bottle of wine to the housewife and the old gentleman loses no opportunity to flirt with the housewife.

Everyone turns to the Logician to resolve the confusion created by Jean after his comment that there were two different rhinos. After a confusing exercise in the application of logic, Bérenger points out that the problem is still unresolved. All that the logician manages is to conclude that the question is “correctly posed” (34).

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Why is Bérenger late? What does it tell us about him?
- ii) Describe Jean’s character in detail and how is he different from his friend?
- iii) What is the role of the minor characters in this act?
- iv) What is the subject of the conversation between the Logician and the old gentleman?

Act II: Scene I

This scene is set in the office of a firm that publishes law books. Mr. Papillon, the Head of the Department, is very “correctly” dressed in a dark blue suit and black tie. Dudard is “thirty-five, grey suit, spectacled, and a young employee with a future” (36). There is another employee—Botard, a former school teacher, who “knows everything, understands everything, and judges everything” (37). Women are described in minimal terms; Daisy the receptionist is “a young blond” and Mrs. Boeuf is “old, tearful, and breathless” (37).

The act begins with Botard’s refusal to believe that a cat was killed by a rhinoceros, as mentioned in an obituary placed in the newspaper by its owner. Daisy interjects, saying she has witnessed this incident and Dudard supports her. An argument takes place between them. Dudard is a sensitive, logical, composed person, whereas Botard is a haughty intellectual, proud of his “methodical mind” (38). He ridicules the news by suggesting that the journalists are liars as they have not added any details about the gender, colour or breed of the cat, nor have they mentioned details about the rhinoceros; whether it was Asiatic or African. Notice how Botard, like Jean, is concerned with trivialities like the species of the rhino rather than the bizarre phenomenon itself.

Bérenger, who also works at this office, arrives late and the receptionist, Daisy covers up for him. He is drawn in to the discussion and attests to the existence of the rhinoceros.



Botard dismisses the incident as an example of “collective psychosis” (43). He even goes to the extent of giving the incident political overtones by suggesting that it is some kind of “propaganda” (44). Botard and Papillon, like Jean, are aggressive, self-opinionated and domineering. They believe they are always right because their conversations are mostly driven by facts and logic.

Suddenly Mrs. Boeuf, the wife of another employee, enters the office, breathless and flustered, as she has been chased all the way from her home by a rhinoceros. She has come to inform them that her husband, who is out of town, has sent a telegram that he is down with the flu and would be unable to report for work. Suddenly a rhinoceros is heard creating a commotion downstairs, going round in circles and attempting to climb the staircase, which breaks, leaving everyone trapped on the first floor. Everyone peers down to look at it and Mrs Boeuf exclaims that it is her husband, who has transformed into a rhinoceros. Mrs Boeuf faints and Béranger tries to revive her. The characters seem to be unaffected, speculating if such transformations are covered under insurance, if divorcing such people/animals is a viable option; calculating whether the reported numbers of transformations are exaggerations or not. Mrs Boeuf declares that she will not abandon her husband and joins him by jumping down the shaft.

There is confusion and, once again, the argument revolves around identifying the species of the rhinoceros. The occurrence of these rapid transformations is unquestioningly accepted as another unfortunate, inexplicable phenomenon, but not as something unnatural or impossible. It is comical that even in such bizarre circumstances, Mr. Papillon is worried about his work; ordering Daisy to type his letters and warning Béranger that it is not a holiday.

At this point there is confusion, and with reports of people metamorphosing into rhinoceroses, the distinction between normal and abnormal is lost; hopelessness dominates this part. The fire brigade come to rescue the employees trapped in the building.

Check Your Progress 2

- (i) How are Botard and Dudard described in this scene? What are their respective responses to the news?
- (ii) There is a rhinoceros (unseen) in this scene. Who is this transformed animal and what does it want? How do we get to know?
- (iii) Comment on Mr. Papillon’s behaviour in this act?



Act II: Scene II

Bérenger is disturbed by the previous day's argument with Jean, and decides to visit him at his house. When Bérenger knocks at the door, Jean's neighbour, an old man (also named Jean) opens his door instead and tells Bérenger that Jean was in a foul mood the previous night. The old man's wife asks him to stop gossiping with strangers and he goes inside. The introduction of another character named Jean, who also changes into a rhino is meant to underline the interchange ability of characters. Ionesco probably meant to convey that there is nothing singular about Jean's transformation.

Jean is ill, suffering from an unknown sickness. Bérenger regrets the spat and requests Jean's forgiveness, but Jean seems to have forgotten about it and seems distracted. Bérenger informs him about Mr Boeuf's transformation. Jean disagrees with Bérenger's assumption that it must have been against Boeuf's will and they begin to argue again:

JEAN. Nature has its own laws. Morality's against Nature.

BÉRENGER. Are you suggesting we replace our laws by the law of the jungle.

JEAN. It would suit me, suit me fine. (65)

Jean's anti-humanism comes to the fore. He speaks of a return to a more savage type of existence for humanity. Bérenger points out that the rhinoceroses abide by the laws of the jungle, which are chaotic and destructive. They create havoc wherever they go, are particularly insensitive, and cannot conform to the norms of civilization. Jean asserts that moral standards are only a human compulsion whereas the laws of nature are more gratifying. He speaks of a return to "primeval integrity": going to the extent of declaring that Humanism is dead and those who follow it are just old sentimentalists (66).

Jean's appearance starts to change quickly. Ionesco gives a complete description of this physical transformation. First his skin starts to harden and turn green, then his voice grows hoarse, and a bump in his head starts to develop into a distinct horn. Each time he goes into the bathroom his skin hardens, turns greener, and his voice becomes incomprehensible. All this while, Bérenger tries to convince Jean to seek medical help but he refuses. Instead, he pushes his friend away and begins to pace his apartment in an agitated state. One can feel Bérenger's desperation; he does not want to abandon his friend and tries, as much as is possible for him, to prevent the metamorphosis.

Finally, the transformation is complete; Jean's horn piercing the bathroom door indicates that he has become a rhinoceros. As he tries to escape, Bérenger is horrified to see that the Porter, the old Jean and his wife, have all turned into rhinoceroses. He tries to run out but the street is full of rhinos. The orchestra pit is also lined with rhino heads. A wall breaks down and Bérenger escapes.



Read Jean's observations carefully. Throughout this scene, he displays a sense of affinity with the rhinoceroses. In the beginning of their conversation, when Béranger calls the rhinos "wretched," Jean objects (58). He feels disgusted with humans and, as Béranger observes, he is in a "misanthropic mood" (62). He defends Mr Boeuf's metamorphosis, ticking off Béranger for presuming it was against his will. The point to note is that Jean's physical transformation is accompanied by a change in his outlook as well.

Check Your Progress 3

- (i) Why do Jean and Béranger argue in this act?
- (ii) Describe the physical transformation of Jean in detail. What do you think is the reason for such a change?
- (iii) What is the significance of the appearance of Jean's neighbour, also named Jean?
- (iv) Apart from Jean, who else is transformed into a rhino in this act?

Act III

The whole town seems to have transformed into beasts. With the rhinoceroses roaming the streets, Béranger stays locked in his apartment. Terrified of becoming one himself, he has nightmares and seeks refuge in brandy. For him, things are falling apart into an unknown void, leaving him confused and bewildered. His cough is getting worse and he fears that he has been infected. He yells at the rhinos for causing this horror and ruin.

Concerned about Béranger, Dudard decides to visit him. Béranger is in a state of shock, agitated by this shocking transformation of the entire town and is unnerved, especially after losing his closest friend. Dudard tries to explain to him that Jean's case was an exception because he was "too excitable, a bit wild, an eccentric," and assures Béranger that he is not infected (74). Béranger is not convinced as Jean always seemed in control of his mind. Dudard advises Béranger not to obsess over it and concentrate on getting back to normal.

Dudard reduces the abnormal transformations of humans into beasts as a matter of "personal preferences" and urges Béranger to disengage himself from the problem (78). He informs Béranger about Mr. Papillon's transformation. Again, Béranger regrets that his boss did not resist the metamorphosis, to which Dudard replies:

DUDARD. . . . one has to keep an open mind—that's essential to a scientific mentality. Everything is logical. To understand is to justify. (82)

Feeling cornered by Dudard's arguments, Béranger says he will consult the Logician. At that moment he notices some rhinos passing his house, under the window. He notices



a boater hat, pierced by a rhinoceros horn and recognizes it as the Logician's. He is dismayed to find out that the Logician too has metamorphosed.

Daisy arrives to check on Bérenger and informs them about Botard's conversion. Botard's last human words were: "one must move with the times" (87). All this while, they are surrounded by the sounds of countless rhinoceroses in the streets. Dudard is disturbed by Daisy's visit and her obvious preference for Bérenger. Eventually Dudard leaves, to join "the great universal family" (91).

Agonized by loneliness and alienation, Bérenger confesses his love for Daisy, which she acknowledges and reciprocates. Seeking companionship in each other, they both decide to live a normal life amidst the chaos. Daisy wants Bérenger to stop feeling guilty and seek happiness even in these hopeless circumstances. She plans long romantic walks with him. However, things between them start to worsen when Bérenger holds her, in some way, responsible for Papillon's transformation.

Bérenger begins to hope. He says that the responsibility of perpetuating the human race is now on them since they are the last of their species left. However, Daisy is uncomfortable, saying she does not want to have children as it was "a bore" and distances herself from him (101). She begins to display signs of anxiety, saying that perhaps they are the abnormal ones, whereas the real people have transformed into rhinoceroses and are happy now. Daisy is disturbed when the phone rings and trumpeting noises are heard on the line. The rhinoceroses have taken over the radio station. When they look out of the window, they see all the firemen have transformed as well. All this while, rhinoceroses can be heard making noises all around, even in the apartment above them. Rhino heads are seen on the street outside.

Daisy questions the nature of love itself: "a morbid feeling" (101). Bérenger is outraged and slaps her but immediately apologizes. They make repeated attempts at reconciliation but fail. Daisy seems to be disillusioned and sad. Perhaps she understands the basic difference in their approach to the bizarre reality and realizes that Bérenger will never be able to "escape into the world of the imagination," as she advises him to (96).

Bérenger examines himself carefully in the mirror to check for any signs of change. Meanwhile, Daisy abandons him and joins the rhinos. On realizing that Daisy has forsaken him, he introspects and is remorseful. Left completely alone, Bérenger is filled with anxiety and suspicion. He is assailed by uncertainty and begins to be unsure of his own existence, his physicality, his language, and his capacity to think, and doubts his own sanity. He is broken by self-abasement and attempts to transform himself but fails.

At last, he looks at his own reflection in the mirror and gathers that he is responsible for his plight. Yet again, he gets trapped in the blame game and pledges to take revenge



on the rhinos. It is ironic how, in the end, he regrets not becoming one of the rhinos and accuses himself of being a “human monster” (105). Suddenly, he snaps out of this self-loathing and decides that he will not catapult; declaring that he will fight the rhinos. It is this statement of his intent that makes Béranger something of a hero.

Check Your Progress 4

- (i) What are Botard’s last words as a human?
- (ii) What are Dudard’s views on ‘rhinocertitis’?
- (iii) How is the Logician identified in the end of Act III?
- (iv) Why does Daisy abandon Béranger in the end?
- (v) What, in your opinion, is Béranger’s tragedy and how does it make him a hero?

A Note on the Conclusion

In the end, Béranger emerges as this heroic figure who escapes the thick-skinned transformation and is the last surviving human. He refuses to conform and follow the others. Let us briefly examine the transformation of each character to better understand Béranger’s decision.

When her husband appears as a rhinoceros, Mrs Boeuf not only recognizes him but can also relate to his agony. While Mr Papillon, Dudard and Botard speculate on the possibility of claiming insurance, the role of the trade union and the option of divorce, Mrs Boeuf only wants to join her husband: “I can’t desert him, I can’t desert him now!” she says (49). She jumps from the stairwell, lands on her husband’s back and gallops away with him, pointing to her eventual transformation. Mrs Boeuf’s decision is impelled by the human need for companionship, essential for existence. When Jean has an altercation with Béranger in Act II, he says:

JEAN. I tell you it’s not as bad as all that. After all, rhinoceros are living creatures the same as us; they’ve got as much right to live as we have! Moral Standards! I’m sick of moral standards! We need to go beyond moral standards! Nature has its own laws. Morality’s against Nature. (65)

His empathetic stance towards the rhinos parallels his physical changes. Jean sees no harm in indulgence and views moderation or restraint as unnatural. Anti-humanists like him believe that nature teaches them to enjoy sensuality and all kinds of pleasures, but it is human society which imposes constraints. They believe that free rule of animal instincts is the route to a complete existence.



In the final act, Dudard comes to save Bérenger from remorse and guilt at Jean's transformation. Instead, Dudard himself gets over-involved with the problem, realizing that he must not cease to support his employers and friends in these troubled times:

DUDARD. I've renounced marriage. I prefer the great universal family to the little domestic one . . . It's my duty to stick by them; I have to do my duty. (91)

Dudard's problem is his unreflective acceptance of mass ideology and his intense faith in the values of the masses. He stands for an exaggerated version of duty and brotherhood which brings about his own doom. In the second act, Botard alleges that the entire phenomenon is a conspiracy and a mass illusion but, in the face of the mass transformations, he gives no intellectual justification for his own metamorphosis, except a statement that "one must move with the times" (87).

In the last act, Ionesco undermines the notion of love as an antidote to all human problems. Daisy questions her love for Bérenger and, as the couple distance themselves from each other, the reader is conscious of their dwindling love, failing faith, and withering mutual respect. Soon Daisy begins to be attracted to the rhinoceroses, as they are "beautiful . . . They're like gods" (103). For her, the beseeching roars of the animals are musical, and their brutal strength is imploringly majestic. Daisy leaves Bérenger, disillusioned with him and love itself.

In the end, consumed with guilt and self-doubt, Bérenger looks at his own reflection in the mirror. He feels overwhelmed by the responsibility of convincing people to reverse the changes:

BÉRENGER. Are the changes reversible, that's the point? Are they reversible? It would be a labour of Hercules, far beyond me. (104)

It gets increasingly difficult for Bérenger to retain his identity by refusing to conform. From dismay and disgust, he moves to self-hatred, calling himself "a monster" (105). He is conscious of his inner and outer struggle and how it is going to be impossible to keep his individuality intact. But he gathers his courage and affirms that:

BÉRENGER. I'll take on the whole of them! I'll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating! (103)

Bérenger's declaration of intent, never to yield, is what makes him acquire heroic dimensions.

The interesting point to note is that none of the characters gives any political reason for their transformation. Dudard suggests that people are transforming as they have



caught “rhinocertitis” (73). He suggests that it is a kind of short-lived infection, giving the transformations a pathological dimension. However, it is important to remember that, for most of the characters in the play, it is a desire to remain with the crowd that compels their metamorphosis.

A close reading of the play reinforces the point that Ionesco’s focus is on examining the psychology of the crowd, comprising individuals who do not pause to evaluate the implications of their decisions. In the play, the rhinoceros could stand for any ideology/ totalitarian system that seeks to repress and discourage individuality.

3.6 Characterization

Rhinoceros

It is important to understand that, in the play, the rhinoceroses are not *natural* animals, but transformed creatures that have undergone this degradation through submission. The stage directions by the playwright suggest that not even once is the animal fully revealed on stage. One is mostly given impressions of their presence. In Act I, only noises of a heavy beast approaching, a long trumpeting, followed by galloping, and the sound of panting are heard. Later, people are left staring after the animal—suggesting that the monster has left. In Act II, Scene I, when Mr. Bouef is downstairs, everyone in the office stares down at the creature and comments on its movements and in Act II, Scene II, Jean’s complete transformation is implied by Bérenger’s exclamations from the bathroom and finally, the horn jutting out of the bathroom door. In the last act, the rhino heads that are seen moving outside Bérenger’s apartment and the increasing volume of rhino trumpeting create the impression of a whole town transformed into the beasts.

The rhinoceros is only partially shown: mostly the head or the horn. This ensures that the focus in the play is not so much on the rhinoceros as it is on the process of transformation. The stage directions evoke a sense of danger and claustrophobia. The confusion caused by the noises and shadows gradually escalates the horror.

According to Dudard, “rhinocertitis” is the disease that is responsible for the madness and confusion between fantasy and reality, normal and abnormal in the play (73). It is both contagious and dangerously attractive. Each transformed individual is corrupted in a different way, as if his/her eccentricity is responsible for the abasement.

The *natural* rhinoceroses are solitary creatures who stay away from crowded places. On the contrary, transformation is triggered by a herd-mentality, highlighting the unnaturalness of the crowding *human* rhinos. Hence, the rhinoceroses reflect the collective



consciousness of society, which follows the herd without exercising its ability to think. Ionesco is critical of the human tendency to seek safety in numbers and adopt an unquestioning attitude towards powerful totalitarian regimes. Historians agree that, in the play, Ionesco's satire is directed towards the growing influence of fascist ideology in his native Romania.

Bérenger

Bérenger represents Everyman, caught in the struggles of life. At first, he is this gentle and likeable person, who is bored with the life he is leading, but lacks the strength of character to change it. He resorts to excessive drinking to forget his difficulties. He lacks restraint and cannot commit to anything in life, neither to his job nor his resolution to quit drinking. The only saving grace is his unconditional love for Daisy but, towards the end, he drives her away by trying to thrust the responsibility of saving the human race on her.

Bérenger suffers from a nagging weariness: he is battered by his struggles and seems uninspired by Jean's lecture on self-improvement. According to Edwin T. Williams, Bérenger is surrounded by people who are governed by their "delusions": Jean is a slave to appearance and his intellectual egotism; the Logician is devoted to logic but fails to understand that in a collapsing world, logic cannot explain everything; Dudard is obsessed by a misplaced sense of duty towards others; and Botard is consumed by conceit and shallow values (688). But Bérenger is unaffected by these idiosyncratic beliefs and remains detached till the end. He is aware of these contradictions but then does not conform to any of them—neither to manners, nor logic, nor even to materialism. He is a stranger and a misfit in society; a "Don Quixote," as Dudard calls him (79).

Many critics feel a sense of uncertainty about Bérenger's capacity to sustain his position, alone as he is in the end. However, if you read the play closely, you will observe how Bérenger changes. In the first act, he is indifferent to the rhinoceroses when they first appear and gets into an absurd argument with his friend after the second appearance. Even in the second act, after Mr Bouef appears in his transformed state, Bérenger is preoccupied with the species of the rhinos; wondering if they are Asiatic or African. However, when he witnesses Jean transform into a beast in front of his own eyes, Bérenger is concerned and offers to call a doctor. He tries his best to intervene and help Jean. By the third act, a very different Bérenger appears before us. He voices his disappointment with the transformation of Papillon and disagrees with Dudard's "fatalism" (78). When Dudard asks him what he plans to do about the situation he replies:

BÉRENGER. . . . I don't know for the moment. I must think it over. I shall write to the papers; I'll draw up manifestos; I shall apply for an audience with the mayor . . . (78)



He is willing to take on the role of a messiah to save the human race. Although he is not as learned as Dudard or as politically committed as Botard, he understands “intuitively” that what is happening is not right (83).

It is his stubborn refusal to follow the others, even when left alone, that makes Béranger heroic. From being a chronically lethargic man, who cannot see through the pretentiousness of Jean, he becomes an unlikely symbol of brave resistance amidst mass hysteria.

Jean

Jean is a contrast to Béranger. He is meticulous in his dressing; first appearing in a brown suit, red tie, stiff collar, and well-polished shoes. His first line in the play: “Oh, so you managed to get here at last, Béranger!” displays a deep sarcasm for Béranger’s passivity and inactivity, whereas he himself is a self-righteous, egotistical figure (2). Unlike Béranger, who always doubts himself, Jean has a distinct clarity in his opinions and ideas. Jean’s is a world of certainty and conviction. He represents aggressiveness, willpower and, consequently, a sense of duty to act and be responsible for one’s actions.

Jean embodies Nietzsche’s concept of the ‘will to power,’ a prominent idea in his philosophy which explains that mankind is constantly driven by this urge, this ambition to gain power and strive for the highest position in life. The ambition or the will to achieve is described by Nietzsche as an evolutionary force, whereby only the strongest can survive. Jean’s astute will and rationality is reflected in all his actions, to the point of arrogance. However, this seemingly exemplary Nietzschean figure comes across as a hypocrite. He accuses Béranger of coming late for the meeting though he arrives at the same time as his friend. He lectures Béranger on the need to become more cultured by visiting museums and reading literary periodicals, but refuses to accompany him to the museum because he wants to sleep.

Jean epitomizes the uncritical, self-assured class that echoes the ideas of other thinkers, and is chauvinistic and narrow minded. When there is an argument about the rhinoceroses, Jean makes racist remarks, commenting that Asians are “yellow” (28). As Jean begins to transform, his ideas become simpler and more lucid. Even his sense of purpose gets clearer and concentrated. He rejects the moral laws of society in favour of the laws of Nature, because natural laws provide undisputed freedom of will and action. His preoccupation with self-interest is now reinforced and any obstruction to its fulfilment must be trampled upon by him. When Béranger offers to bring a doctor, Jean threatens to trample him.

Although Jean is always seen to either patronize or ridicule Béranger, his concern for his friend is genuine. He, in his limited way, wants Béranger to become a better person.



His advice to Béranger to keep himself well-groomed and well informed arises from good intentions. Béranger's comment that Jean has "a heart of gold" is not entirely incorrect (30).

Mr. Papillon

Mr. Papillon is the Head of the Department of the publication house. He is nearly forty and is properly dressed in a dark blue suit with a rosette of the Legion of Honour. He controls the employees with his inflexible dictates. He tells Daisy, the receptionist, to put away the times sheets so that the late comers are penalized. When the employees discuss the incident of the rhinoceros killing the pet cat, Papillon puts a check on the discussion. He is dismissive of all arguments which are not in compliance with his ideas. He seems more distressed by how to make replacements and compensate for the loss of work than by the epidemic and its severity. Papillon is rude and unsympathetic towards Mrs Boeuf when she comes to inform him that her husband was unable to come to office because of the flu, and makes advances to Daisy by caressing her cheek when there is a commotion in the office.

It is interesting to note that Ionesco sometimes makes use of animal imagery/names to signify a much deeper meaning. For example, the English translation of the French word 'Boeuf' is 'beef' whereas 'Papillon' means a butterfly. Mrs Boeuf has no willpower and merely follows her husband, and Papillon is an unsympathetic opportunist. He typifies the predatory male who views a woman only as a subordinate and an object of pleasure.

Dudard

Dudard is another employee at the office: a young man with a bright future. He is a law graduate and takes pride in his rationality and analytical skills. He is mostly defensive while talking to Botard, who is his senior, because he sees Botard as a rival for his position in the office. Too eager to prove his worth, he always argues with Botard and attempts to establish himself as an equal. Botard artfully criticizes Dudard's degrees, saying that he lacks practical knowledge. Botard's comments are an indirect satire on the intellectuals/bourgeoisie, who have blind faith in rationality.

Aspiring for Daisy's affections, Dudard is jealous of Béranger. Though vocal in the office, he has been unable to confess his feelings to her. However, he proves a good friend to Béranger, visiting him just after Jean's transformation. He tries to console Béranger and comforts him by reassuring him that he has no chances of getting infected.

Dudard is captivated by 'liberal humanism,' but is oblivious to the dangers of mindless conversion. He submits to a distorted sense of humanism, where he mistakes conformism with mass welfare; believing that what the majority does must be for universal benefit, and people should be allowed to do as they like. He is good-hearted and perceptive, but



loses his rationality towards the end, since he aspires for a higher sense of allegiance even though it is self-destructive. The reason for Dudard's own transformation is his misplaced sense of duty. He feels obligated to be with his employers and friends and views mankind as his universal family, privileging it over the real family.

Botard

Botard is a senior staff member; sixty years of age and a former school teacher. He appears to be a self-opinionated man. Assertive of his hierarchy, he is determined to push Dudard as a junior and make him subservient. He feels threatened by his younger colleague's popularity and efficiency. He refuses to believe that the pet cat, whose obituary is placed in the paper, was trampled by a rhinoceros on the streets and challenges Dudard's arguments. Botard behaves like a Mr Know-All, to the extent that knowledge becomes a vice. He can only see things in his own limited way, dominated by conceit and shallowness.

Botard's left-wing leanings are apparent from his announcement that he will take up the matter of Mr. Boeuf's insurance with the trade union of their firm. He echoes Karl Marx when he dismisses the news of the rhinoceros as an example of mass hysteria. Botard attempts to give the appearance of the rhinos a political dimension, calling it a conspiracy and part of some propaganda. Dudard takes a dig at his association with radical politics when he accuses Botard of being in the pay of a "furtive underground organization" (44). It is ironic that Botard is unable to provide a convincing explanation for the transformations and in the end, as reported by Daisy, his decision to convert is a passive, uncritical desire to follow the masses.

Logician

The Logician symbolizes the inadequacy of logic to explain the world. The Logician relies on deductive logic to solve problems and overemphasizes the relevance of the scientific approach. His reliance on logic is ridiculed in his conversations with the old man, where he proves that a dog is a cat. He symbolizes glorified Western logic, following the tradition of Aristotle, and Ionesco exposes its redundancy.

Syllogisms, which are a sequence of three propositions, in which the first and the second imply the third as a conclusion, have been used over time to prove things. In the play, the inadequacy of logic is parodied, through the character of the Logician, with his absurd attempts to explain syllogisms to the old gentleman. Logic cannot be the only paradigm to understand reality.

The Logician's character is an interesting satire on the human desire to comprehend and control. At the end of the first act, he is incapable of answering the questions raised by the people around him. After a long and convoluted speech, all he succeeds in doing



is correctly posing the problem (34). Bérenger respects him a lot and decides to consult him when he is unconvinced by Dudard's viewpoint; only to discover that, like the others, the Logician has also transformed into a rhino.

Daisy

There is no detailed physical description of Daisy, apart from "young blond typist" (15). Daisy is presented as the love interest of Bérenger and as a sensitive human, she is there to help him in difficult times. She does not have a strong personality though, as she gets easily silenced and cornered by the male characters, especially Botard. She attempts to act as the guiding principle in Bérenger's life by asking him to limit his liquor consumption, but fails to motivate him for a long time. Even when she is harassed by her boss, both physically and mentally, she does not retaliate. Once she witnesses the chaos outside, she seeks support in Bérenger and reciprocates his feelings for her. But Daisy changes quickly, declining to be Bérenger's partner in creating a new race because she finds it "boring" (101). She challenges the idea of love amidst the building pressure of the world outside.

Daisy wants a normal life and does not want to share the responsibility of regenerating the human race with Bérenger. She blatantly rejects the role of Eve and, unsure of their future, declares the futility of procreation. Instead, she seems attracted to the beauty and singing of the rhinos. Her unconditional love for Bérenger is suddenly replaced by a perverse fascination for the strength of the rhinos. Seemingly enraptured by the beauty of the beasts outside and disillusioned with Bérenger, Daisy leaves him in the end.

3.7 Important Themes

The *Rhinoceros* as a political allegory

It is no coincidence that the shirts worn by the Iron Guard legionnaires, the Romanian ultra-nationalist fascist party and the uniforms worn by Nazi occupiers in France in 1940 were both a dark green colour, akin to a rhinoceros' hide. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* has been interpreted as an allegory about the rise of Nazism and fascism before and during the Second World War. However, it is important to remember that *Rhinoceros* is a parable, an allegory about totalitarianism of any kind. Ionesco himself refused to identify the rhinoceros with either Nazism or fascism. His response is illustrative:

Rhinoceros is certainly an anti-Nazi play, yet it is also and mainly an attack on collective hysteria and epidemics that lurk beneath the surface of reason and ideas but are none the less serious collective diseases passed off as ideologies.

(Preface to the 1961 school edition)



People always wish me to spell out whether I mean the rhinos to be fascists or communists. Rhinocerositis is not an illness of the Right or the Left; it cannot be contained within geo-political borders. Nor is it characteristic of a social class. It is the malady of conformity which knows no bounds, no boundaries.

(A Note on *Rhinoceros*)

The humans in the play surrender to the disease and, as it acquires the proportions of an epidemic, they fail to see it as an illness. They begin to think of this adversity as advantageous and even natural. As more and more people transform, they all begin to think of the rhinoceroses as more beautiful, majestic, and desirable. This turn of events is alarming. As explained earlier, the play's focus is on the human failure to use reason or logic in such situations.

Rhinoceros offers a critical analysis of the political and social milieu of that time, through the writer's representation of the dangers of conformity. As a young man in the Romania of the 1930s and 40s, Ionesco was disturbed by the growing fanaticism—among young intellectuals, artists and writers—for Corneliu Codreanu, leader of the extreme right wing Iron Guard. Many of them were friends of his. Disturbed by the political developments around him, Ionesco was inspired to write this play.

It is true that there is an inevitable strength in numbers, required for the success of any movement, but when it transforms into an uncritical herd mentality, it becomes dangerous. The playwright is critical of this blind faith of people on their leaders, who eventually benefit from this ignorance and stupidity and neglect the needs of the masses. Audiences, with the memory of the Holocaust fresh in their minds, immediately saw answers to disturbing historical questions: how could so many people in a civilized society have participated in the genocide of Jews, swayed by notions of Aryan supremacy propagated by Hitler.

Ionesco's Criticism of the Bourgeoisie

In *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco exposes the middle-class preoccupation with materialistic values or social conventions. This class comprises people like Jean, Botard, Mr Papillon, and Dudard. Bérenger, who is always weighed down, represents the anguish of the bourgeoisie, unable to understand the true purpose of life.

Ionesco is critical of the bourgeoisie, who present themselves as custodians of rationality and morality. Their ineptness is demonstrated by their herd-like conformity. The problem of the middle-class is that, consumed by aspirations and desires, it fails to reflect and introspect. It becomes increasingly dehumanized and depersonalized. It is the individual alone who has to bear the onus of self-scrutiny and self-improvement. Bérenger,



who acts as a foil, uncovers for us the dilemmas of the middle-class; the monotony and boredom of a tedious routine, their enslavement by a consumerist psychology, and the mass of prejudices to which they have succumbed. Béranger exposes for us the stifling and claustrophobic lives of the middle-class, who have no means of escape. His reliance on alcohol is a way to retain sanity in this world of utter chaos and he struggles with the oppressive middle-class lifestyle, which leaves no room for individuality and personal development.

In the *Rhinoceros*, it is Jean, Botard, and Dudard who represent the educated, intellectual class. Botard is the left-leaning rationalist; Dudard, the university-educated liberal humanist; and Jean, the upwardly mobile man, with his middle-class ethics of self-control, hard work, and self-improvement. In the first act, Jean creates a lot of confusion with his query about the species of the rhinoceros, Asiatic or African. He also makes some racist remarks. He quotes from great thinkers but, like the others, is unable to think for himself in a crisis. Jean echoes the 17th century philosopher Rene Decartes:

JEAN. You don't exist, my dear Béranger, because you don't think. Start thinking, then you will. (17)

Botard also quotes from Karl Marx when ridiculing the hysteria generated by the appearance of the rhinos:

BOTARD. An example of collective psychosis, Mr. Dudard. Just like religion — the opiate of the people. (43)

Ionesco exposes the mindless posturing of these people. Confronted by a crisis, they cannot exercise their reason. Jean is attracted by the primitive freedom enjoyed by the rhinos, Dudard is driven by a sense of allegiance to the higher family and Botard desires to move with the times: all abdicate their reason and surrender to the transformation. The *Rhinoceros* is an indictment of a whole class that fails to fulfil its social responsibility.

In the end, it is the comparatively apolitical Béranger who resists the transformation. Béranger is unable to spell out the reasons for his defiance but claims that they are “intuitive” (83). Ionesco commented that Béranger's resistance is all the more authentic because it is a spiritual feeling.

3.8 The Language of *Rhinoceros*

At the onset of the play, on sighting a running rhino, each character echoes the same reaction: “Oh, a rhinoceros!” (6). The repetition introduces an element of absurdity. It is an apathetic response, considering the bizarre circumstances. The dialogues are also full of clichés, especially those of Jean, Dudard, and Botard. Jean tells Béranger “the superior



man is the man who fulfils his duty” (5). Talking like a politician, he does not understand the gravity of his statements. It exposes the predictability of people, lack of any originality of ideas, and scarcity of expressions. The language blurs the distinction between the real and unreal, the normal and the abnormal.

The dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd believed that language was ill-equipped to convey human experience as it was a limiting factor. In *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco uses non-linguistic means to convey his dramatic message. The rhinoceros is a powerful metaphor for the dangers of mindless conformity, especially of the political kind. More than the language, the metaphor/symbol of the rhinoceros contributes to the play’s meaning. This is a distinctive characteristic of the playwrights of this genre.

Glossary

This section includes a brief definition of terms you may be unfamiliar with.

Fascism: Fascism is defined as a radical and authoritarian form of nationalism which generally takes a terrorizing turn due to its intolerance and anti-democratic nature. Fascism originated in Italy during the First World War and then spread to other regions, as a substitute to the difficulties caused by economic disparity under communism. Fascism aims to establish a totalitarian (a political system where the state holds absolute authority over its subjects and controls both public and private spaces of the society) state — led by a strong leader, mostly a dictator, who would resolve social and economic problems.

French Avant-Garde Theatre: Avant-garde theatre was an experimental theatre which challenged the deliverance of perfect meaning, refused simple explanations, rejected conventional ways of writing, made contesting use of language, and undermined authorial autonomy by privileging the self-reliance of the readers. The most significant dramatist of this time was Alfred Jarry, who is best known for his peculiar comic play *Ubu Roi*, in which he challenges the figures of authority. Other important playwrights were Antonin Artaud and Apollinaire. Influenced by these experimental writers, Martin Esslin coined the term ‘Theatre of the Absurd,’ to describe the works of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov.

Humanism: It signifies a philosophical and moral pursuit of human life, through a deeper understanding of human nature. Early humanists focused on the study of the classics, especially Latin. They worked extensively on the ideas of great thinkers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero. Around the nineteenth century, the word humanism came to stand for the general values and ideas common to several Renaissance humanists. Renaissance humanism emphasized the centrality and sovereignty of human beings in the entire universe and the importance of studying literature that underlined morality and use of reason in



human life, as opposed to impulsive passions. It preferred rational thinking over religious faith, suggesting that truth is revealed only by human experience. Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold were notable humanists of their times.

Nazism: The ideology of the German Nazi party thrived on racism and anti-Semitism. Believing in their racial superiority, Germanic people believed they were the true Aryans or the race with most superior origins. Thereby, they aspired to establish a homogenous society by overcoming social divisions and cleansing society by eradicating those they perceived as racial inferiors, such as Jews. Offering itself as an alternative to Marxism and Capitalism, Nazism arose as a pan-German movement and threatened other minorities by its intolerance and radical extremism. Eventually, Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, and Nazis became a one-party state, whereby anarchy was established and all unwanted elements such as Jews or political opponents were not just marginalized but exterminated.

Syllogism: It is a deductive form of reasoning where the conclusion is drawn from two different propositions. The final meaning is logically derived from two different statements which are believed to be true. For example: a) Reptiles have no fur; b) All snakes are reptiles; therefore c) All snakes have no fur.

3.9 Long Answer Questions

- (i) Describe the main features of the Theatre of the Absurd.
- (ii) Discuss *Rhinoceros* as a political allegory.
- (iii) Is Bérenger a hero or an anti-hero? Discuss, giving suitable examples from the play.
- (iv) Do you think that the absurd elements of the play dilute its political agenda? Give reasons.

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