

## **Block-3**

**Unit-1 : J. M. Synge: *Riders to the Sea* (Introduction and Stage History)**

**Unit 2 : J. M. Synge: *Riders to the Sea* (Reading the Play)**

**Unit 3 : J. M. Synge: (*Riders to the Sea*)  
(*Supplementary Unit*)**

**Unit 4 : John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger* (Introduction and Stage History)**

**Unit 5 : John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger* (Reading the Play)**

**Unit 6 : John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger* (Supplementary Unit)**



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## Unit-1 : J. M. Synge: *Riders to the Sea* (Introduction and Stage History)

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*Space for Learner*

### Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Important Dates
- 1.4 Sources of the Play
- 1.5 Social Background of *Riders to the Sea*
- 1.6 Stage History of the Play
- 1.7 Critical Response to the Play
- 1.8 Summing Up
- 1.9 References and Suggested Reading

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### 1.1 Objectives

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After finishing this unit, you will be able to

- *learn* about the date and sources of the play
- *learn* about the social background of the play
- *learn* how the play has been staged at different times
- *learn* about the diverse critical responses to the play.

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### 1.2 Introduction

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John Millington Synge (16 April, 1871—24 March, 1909) is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of Ireland and is bracketed with such writers of genius such as Oscar Wilde, G.B. Shaw, W.B. Yeats and James Joyce. Synge is noted for the fact that he grounded his dramatic art exclusively in Ireland. For the materials of his plays he used the legends and folk tales of Ireland as well as her peasantry and their speech (Benson 1) and produced such masterpieces as *Riders to the Sea*, *The Well of the Saints* and *The Playboy of the Western World*.

*Riders to the Sea* is the first play written by Synge in the summer of 1902. Although it was written at the very beginning of Synge's career as

a working dramatist, it is not a work of an apprentice, rather, as many critics would like to believe, it is Synge's most perfect play, literally a masterpiece, the first accomplished work of a master craftsman (Greene 41). Moreover, it is the only play that Synge set on Aran. Although the plot of the play appears to be extraordinarily simple, the play's overall impression is one of inexhaustible meaning and complexity.

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### 1.3 Important Dates

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The important dates about the composition of the play are given below:

- *Riders to the Sea* was first published in Yeats' *Samhain* (1903)
- First performed on 25 February 1904 at Molesworth Hall.
- It was performed at Abbey Theatre in 1907.

#### Stop to Consider

If you go through the details of Synge's plays *Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*, you will see that *Shadow of the Glen* (8 December, 1903) was performed before *Riders* (25 February 1904), however, *Shadow* (1904) was published after the *Riders* (1903).

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### 1.4 Sources of the Play

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For the composition of the play *Riders to the Sea*, John Millington Synge drew inspirations from multiple sources and experiences. The main sources are discussed below:

The Aran Islands consisting of Inishmore, Inishmaan and Inisheer in the Atlantic Ocean played a significant role in the composition of the *Riders*. Following the advice of W.B. Yeats to "express a life that has never found expression", Synge went to Aran in 1897. During his five annual visits to the Islands, he studied the fishing villages and their way of life and out of his experience he created *Riders* that reflects the relentless nature of the sea, the culture's stoicism, the lyricism expressed in the idioms and phrases of the Gaelic-Celtic semantics, and tragic-evoking pathos (Krasner 171). The central incidents of the play as well as many of the motifs that we find in the play are based on the personal experiences of the playwright when he last visited the Aran Islands in 1901. In fact, the story on which the play is based as well as from which it derives its title was already mentioned in

the Part Four of *The Aran Islands* which he completed in 1901 and published in 1907.

When the horses were coming down to the slip an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn't say what she was after seeing, and this man caught the horse, he caught his own horse first, and then he caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned.

Again, while Synge was on Inishmaan, he heard a story of a man drowned in the ocean and whose body was later on washed up far away coast of Donegal. He narrated this incident in the Part Three of *The Aran Island*:

'Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pampooty on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.'

From the peculiarities of dress on the washed-up body, it was later recognized as that of a native from Inishmaan. This incident provided Synge that materials for the sub plot involving the death of Michael in the *Riders*.

During his visits to the Aran Islands, Synge not only developed insights into the daily struggles, losses and resilience of the island community, he also became familiar with their folklore and oral traditions. He showed great interest in the content of the stories he heard as Irish folklores and tried to retain their style so much so that he often discarded such vocabulary and syntax which did not reflect the style of the Aran people. Therefore, it is natural that Synge was aware of the many tales of "second sight" popular the Celtic races and he used them as the basis of the "vision" in the *Riders*. In *The Aran Islands*, he describes how a small boy in Inishmaan told him quite a few stories of ghostly apparitions, including one of a man 'away' with the fairies: 'A little while ago Patch Ruadh saw him going down the road with broga arda on him and a new suit.' (Prose p. 165). This particular story of the boy served as a model of his description of Michael. Similarly, the source of the 'grey pony' which Michael rides has been traced to a story Synge heard about a woman taken by the fairies.

*she told them [the fairies] would all be leaving that part of the country on the Oidhche Shamhna, and that there would be four*

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or five hundred of them riding on horses, and herself would be on a grey horse, riding behind a young man. (Prose p. 159)

**Check Your Progress**

Critically analyse how does Synge’s experience of the Aran Islands help him in writing *Riders to the Sea*? (in 100 words)

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**1.5 Social Background of *Riders to the Sea***

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Ever since W. B. Yeats praised Synge as a person ‘incapable of political thought’, Syngean criticism has made a lingering effort to sever him from all political and even social events of the day. However, if you minutely read the text, you will discover that besides his personal experience, we also need to understand the significance of a few social factors for a proper appreciation of the play. One such social factor is Irish Nationalism. At the turn of the 20th century, Ireland was experiencing a strong movement towards Irish nationalism and a desire for independence from British rule. Synge’s play reflects the rural Irish experience and captures the spirit of Irish identity and cultural resilience in the face of adversity. Simon Williams is of the opinion that *Riders* is “arguably the most complete realization of the Yeatsian myth of Ireland staged by the Irish National Theatre, more complete than Yeats achieved in any of his own plays.”(84)

If you go through the social history of Ireland, you will find her as a predominantly sea-faring nation. As a community sharing an intimate relationship with the sea, the Aran community had to constantly face the challenges posed by a ruthless sea. Through his visits to the Aran Islands, Synge also got the opportunity to learn about the constant negotiations with weather that the Islanders had to make while travelling in a curagh. In his *The Aran Islands*, Synge repeatedly refers to the threat of drowning faced by the Islanders their experiences of exhilaration, terror and profound dejection in the face of the churning sea.

Synge repeatedly notes the threat of drowning in *The Aran Islands*, and variously experiences exhilaration, terror and profound dejection – all aspects of the sublime – in the face of the churning sea:

‘Even, I thought, if we were dropped into the blue chasm of the waves, this death, with the fresh sea saltness in one’s teeth, would be better than most deaths one is likely to meet’ (CW II, 97).

However, his assessment of the threat of drowning changes its tone soon after and he frankly admits:

‘After a few hours, the mind grows bewildered with the endless change and struggle of the sea, and an utter despondency replaces the first moment of exhilaration’ (CW II, 108).

According to Frawley(17) ,this emotional shift of the playwright as expressed in *The Aran Islands*, bears a great deal of significant for *Riders*, because it is embedded in the keen, which Synge described as a ‘profound ecstasy of grief’ (CW II, 74). He also believes that this tradition of keening contains no personal complaint ... but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. (CW II, 75)

Although there is no overt historical reference in *Riders*, one may discern a silent political commentary encoded in the action of the play. The play certainly makes an effort to attract the attention of the audience to the ‘drudgery of economics’. The play highlights the fact that the significance of money, property, and material wellbeing for the inhabitants of the Aran Islands is no less than the significance of any metaphysical contemplation. Thus, for Synge, the action of the play is dependent not on a fishing expedition, but on Bartley’s trading mission to Galway(McDonald 77). Bartley’s insistence on going to Galway to sell his horse shows the effect of modernity on the traditional subsistence lifestyle of the inhabitants of Aran islands. The play exemplifies the conflict between community and industrial society by implying that it is because of the poverty of Maurya’s

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family and their related need to get a good price for what they sell , Bartley cannot choose with disinterested freedom his time of departure (King 51). Even though the weather is not conducive for a sea voyage, Bartley is convinced that he “must go now quickly. This is the one boat going for two weeks or beyond it, and the fair will be a good fair for horses, I heard them saying below.” Unlike Bartley, however, his mother is not driven by economic considerations and attempts to keep her last of the six sons alive pleading, “It’s hard set we’ll be surely the day you’re drowned with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me , and I am old woman looking for the grave” But her traditional maternal pleadings fail to win over economic considerations leaving her to bereave for all her six sons.

**SAQ**

Critically analyse the impact of the Irish Nationalism on the Irish literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. ( in 200 words)

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**1.6 Stage History of the Play**

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As we have already mentioned, *Riders to the Sea* was first performed at the Molesworth Hall in Dublin by the Irish national Theatre Society on February 25, 1904. Directed by W.B. Yeats, the play received critical acclaim for its portrayal of the harsh realities faced by the Aran Islands where the play is set.

The initial success of the *Riders* led to its revival at the Abbey Theatre in 1907, three years after its premiere. The staging of the *Riders* showcased the developing style and techniques of the Abbey Theatre, which aimed to represent Irish life and culture on stage. The performance of Sara Allgood as Maurya in *Riders* helped the actress to attain the status of a legendary performer in Irish theatre. She started to act in the role of Maurya in 1906 when she was 27 and owing to her popularity of her role she continued it into the 1920s.



### Stop to Consider

#### **Abbey Theatre**

Abbey Theatre, located in Dublin, opened on 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1904 with a double bill of two one-act plays by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. It developed from the Irish Literary Theatre founded by them 1899. It became an important centre of Irish Revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1904 they codirected its productions with Synge, commissioned works by Sean O'Casey and staged their own plays. Abbey Theatre earned significant fame by staging Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). It is the first state-subsidized theatre in the English-speaking world when it received government grant in 1925. After the original theatre was burned down in 1951, the new Abbey opened in 1966.

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The play's representation of the themes of loss, grief, and the resilience of the human spirit resonated with audiences outside of Ireland and it was performed in various countries. In 1911, it was translated into German and staged in Berlin. The play also had productions in the United States and the United Kingdom, contributing to its growing reputation as a seminal work of Irish drama.

The Abbey continued to stage *Riders to the Sea* throughout the 20th century. The play was often featured in seasons dedicated to Synge's works or as part of programmes highlighting Irish playwrights. These revivals maintained the play's significance and ensured its enduring presence in the theatrical repertoire.

Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, *Riders to the Sea* continued to be staged by professional theater companies, universities, and community theaters worldwide. In 2006 Druid Theatre mounted *Riders* also with Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding*, *The Well of the Sains*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and branded the whole show as DruidSynge which turned out to be a high theatrical success. Synge's *Riders* has been used as the model for other plays and adaptations which also include D. H. Lawrence's one-act mining tragedy *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* (1914) and Bertolt Brecht's 1937 Spanish Civil War based play *Señora Carrar's Rifles*. It was also turned into an opera by Vaughan Williams in 1927. Over time,

*Riders* has been adapted for different mediums, including radio broadcasts and television productions. These adaptations helped introduce the play to new audiences and extend its cultural impact.

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### 1.7 Critical Response to the Play

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By the autumn of 1902, Synge had finished both *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen*. On his way to the annual visit to the Islands, he decided to stop off at Coole to show the plays to W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. Even though no publisher was yet ready to print the plays, Lady Gregory was deeply impressed by the plays and termed them “both masterpieces, both perfect in their way” and about the playwright she remarked, “He had gathered emotion, the driving force he needed from his life among the people, and it was the working in dialect that set free his style.” Besides Yeats and Lady Gregory, contemporary literary luminaries such as G.K. Chesterton, John Masefield and Arthur Symons were unanimous in their view that “the short one act play was a masterpiece of cottage-kitchen realism”(Collins 114).

However, not everybody was equally impressed by *Riders* and the responses in the national press were full of objections. After the play was opened in February, 1904, *The Irish Times* accepted that the “idea underlying the work is good enough” but added that “the treatment of it is to our mind repulsive. Indeed the play develops into something like a wake. The long exposure of the dead body before an audience may be realistic but is certainly not artistic. There are some things which are lifelike, and yet are quite unfit for presentation on the stage and we think that *Riders to the Sea* is one of them.” In the issue of *The Leader* of 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1904, the Irish journalist and cultural-political theorist D.P. Moran termed the premier of *Rider* “a ghastly production” and commented that it reminded him “of a visit to a dissecting room”. *The Independent* described *Riders* as “studies in melancholy” and observed that it was “too dreadfully doleful to please the popular taste”.

Among those who disliked *Riders* was Synge’s compatriot James Joyce who criticized it for its not being “an Aristotelian”. He disliked the play because it was “all in one act” and since the tragedy was consummated by a pony, Joyce found it far removed from Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. For him *Riders* was just a tragic poem, not a

tragedy—merely a ‘dwarf drama’. While a few critics and scholars were antagonistic towards *Riders*, the number of its supporters are many more. According to Tom Driver *Riders* is so exquisite and of such power that one may call it perfect within its own carefully defined limitations (138). Eugene Benson calls *Riders* “an astonishingly mature work of art” adding that “it is a masterpiece enjoyed equally in the library or in the theatre” (51). David Krasner, in his *A History of Modern Drama, Vol.-I* remarks “Perhaps no play exemplifies the state of suspended tension between life and death better than Synge’s powerful one-act *Riders to the Sea*”(171).

**Check Your Progress**

Discuss how Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* has been received by critics since its first performance to the present times. ( in 100 words)

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**1.8 Summing Up**

J.M. Synge’s play *Riders to the Sea* is noted as an important milestone in the annals of Irish theatre. His powerful projection of the hard struggle, perseverance, life and culture of the people of the Aran Islands has mesmerized people across the globe. Although *Riders* cannot be accepted as a tragedy in the Aristotelian convention, yet it is a very powerful modern tragedy.

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**1.9 References and Suggested Reading**

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Collins, Christopher. *Theatre and Residual Culture: J.M. Synge and Pre-Christian Ireland*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

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## Unit 2 : J. M. Synge: (*Riders to the Sea* Reading the Play)

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### Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Important Characters of the Play
- 2.4 Summary of the Play
- 2.5 Major Themes of *Riders to the Sea*
- 2.6 *Riders to the Sea* as a Tragedy
- 2.7 Treatment of the Supernatural Elements in the Play
- 2.8 Language of the Play *Riders to the Sea*
- 2.9 Discussing the character of Mourya
- 2.10 Summing Up
- 2.11 References and Suggested Readings

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### 2.1 Objectives

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By the end of this unit you will be able to

- *understand* the major themes of the play
- *appreciate* *Riders to the Sea* as a tragedy
- *understand* Synge's treatment of the supernatural in the play
- *appreciate* Synge's use of the Irish dialect

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### 2.2 Introduction

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As we have already mentioned in Unit-1, J.M. Synge's one-act play *Riders to the Sea* is one of the greatest dramatic creations in Irish literature. It has been termed a "flawless masterpiece" (Bourgeois 171) which faithfully reflects the intimate relationship the natives of Aran Islands share with the sea and draws on 'practical, mythical and literary aspects' of Ireland's seafaring tradition.

Critics have discovered a socialist leaning in this play and calling it “a drama of a house divided against itself by the presence of history and time”, Mary King (49) argues that it exemplifies the conflict between the community and the industrial society. The play, according to David Krasner, “combines the sorrow of the people fated to die a horrible death, their lyrical poetry, and the rhythms inhibiting their sounds and movements. There is an odd congruity here—beauty and morbidity—impressively presented in a landscape of concupiscence and desolation” (175).

*Riders* is also praised by critics as a play that comes closest to what is called “modern sublime”. The first quality that contributes towards its sublimity is its brevity. The sublime, according to Longinus, should have the “ability to form grand conceptions” and in the second place comes the requirement of “the stimulus of powerful and inspired emotions”. Both these qualities of the Sublime are innate in *Riders* in addition to the very important quality of “grandeur” which is powerfully echoed in the speeches of Maurya.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **Longinus (AD 213—273)**

Longinus is Greek philosopher and rhetorician. He came from Emesa in the modern day Syria and taught in Athens. His most famous work “On the Sublime” locates the sources of poetic excellence in the profundity of the writer’s emotions and the seriousness of his thoughts. His concept of the sublime influenced many significant writers such as Dennis, Shaftsbury, Pope, John Brown, William Duff and Edith Warton.

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### **2.3 Important Characters of the Play**

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- Maurya : Grief-stricken widow and mother of eight children
- Cathleen : Maurya s elder daughter
- Nora : Maurya s younger daughter

**SAQ**

1. Briefly discuss the character of Nora or Cathleen. (50 words)

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2. Discuss the significance of the character of Nora in the plot of *Riders*. (50 words)

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3. Critically analyse the character of Maurya. (200 words)

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## **2.4 Summary of the Play**

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*Riders to the Sea* opens in a cottage kitchen located in the Aran Islands off the west of Ireland. At the very beginning, we find Cathleen, a girl of about twenty, busy in household chores. Her younger sister Nora enters the kitchen carrying a bundle of clothes hidden under her shawl. After being informed that their mother Maurya is lying down, Nora tells Cathleen that the bundle containing a shirt and a plain stocking has been delivered by the young priest. These clothes were recovered from the body of a drowned man in Donegal. Nora wants her sister to help in ascertaining if the clothes really belong to their drowned brother Michael. But Cathleen is not sure if a drowned body will float for such a long distance. Anyway, they decide not to inform their mother about the bundle of clothes.

Cathleen asks Nora if she later had asked the priest if he would try to stop Bartley from going to the Galway fair across the sea. Nora replies in the affirmative but informs that the priest would not make any attempt to

dissuade Bartley as he believed that the Almighty God would not leave their mother a destitute “with no son leaving”.

Just before their mother Maurya enters the kitchen, the sisters manage to hide the bundle of clothes in the turf-loft. Cathleen informs her mother that she is baking a cake for Bartley who plans to go to Connemara. But Maurya is confident that her youngest son will be stopped by the Priest from going to the stormy sea because she has already lost all her sons but Bartley as well as her husband and father-in-law to the sea. However, Bartley soon arrives only to declare his resolve to carry on the voyage. Maurya tries her best to dissuade Bartley from leaving for the sea by referring to the death of her son Michael and the white boards she has bought for making the coffin. But her pleadings fall on deaf ears as Bartley adamantly continues his preparation for his voyage.

Soon Bartley leaves for the sea bidding adieu to his sisters but his mother refuses to bless him for the journey. She is quite sure that when “the black night is falling I’ll have no son left me in the world”. Both her daughters are unhappy with Maurya for her forebodings and send her to the spring well to bless Bartley and hand over the cake he forgot to take. Meanwhile Nora and Cathleen examine the clothes and confirm that they are Michael’s. As they are mourning the death of Michael, a distraught Maurya returns still holding the bread. She recounts that she has seen the vision of Michael riding behind Bartley—a vision that confirms the death of her last son.

Nora and Cathleen hear someone cry out by the seashore. Cathleen wonders if the body of Michael has been recovered. However, one of the mourning women who come to their cottage affirms that it is Bartley who is dead. She further adds that he drowned in the sea when his gray pony knocked him down into the sea.

Maurya kneels near Bartley’s body and sprinkles holy water on him and prays to the Almighty God to have mercy on the souls of all the male



members of her family as well as on the soul of everyone left living in the world. Before the curtain falls, Maurya says, “Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.”

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## **2.5 Major Themes of *Riders to the Sea***

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We may now discuss the major themes of J.M. Synge’s play *Riders* :

### **Man versus Nature**

The central theme of *Riders* is the struggle of man against the elements of nature. In *Riders* the greatest challenge that man faces in his struggle to survive is the sea. As we know, Ireland is an island nation, and, as such it shares an intimate relationship with sea. However, this relationship is not on equal terms. The sea is infinitely much more powerful than the human beings inhabiting the Aran Islands. In his *The Aran Islands*, Synge repeatedly emphasises the danger of drowning in the sea which is also echoed in *Riders*. The tradition of keening that women indulge in after losing their menfolk against the forces of the sea in *Riders* also highlights the contest between man and nature:

... but (it) seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. (CW II, 75)

In *Riders*, we are introduced to the grief-stricken widow and mother of eight children Maurya, who has lost her husband and five sons to the sea. When the play begins we find Nora and her elder sister Cathleen receive word from the priest that a body, believed to be that of

her brother Michael, has washed up on shore in Donegal. With the death of Michael, Maurya is left with only one son—Bartley. She tries to stop him from going to the sea but he sails to Connemara to sell a horse ignoring Maurya's pleas to stay. Maurya predicts that by nightfall she will have no living sons and her daughters chide her for sending Bartley off with an ill word. Maurya goes after Bartley to bless his voyage, and Nora and Cathleen examine the clothes from the drowned corpse to confirm it to be Michael's. Maurya returns home claiming to have seen the ghost of Michael riding behind Bartley and laments the loss of the men in her family to the sea, after which several villagers bring in the corpse of Bartley, who has fallen off his horse into the sea and has got drowned. Maurya has lost everything but she retains her composure and in a heart-rending speech reflects the struggle of the inhabitants of the Aran Islands against the sea where they have seldom scored a win:

I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house — six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world — and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them.

### **The Resilience of Women**

Another major theme of *Riders* is the resilience of women. The play emphasises the significant role and resilience of women in rural Irish communities. Throughout the play, women characters like Nora, Cathleen and Maurya have demonstrated great strength of character while facing the challenges of life. The women of the play certainly mourn the death of their menfolk, but they also preside over those incidents of death (Benson 64). In *Riders* we notice that only the men die while the women endure. Women like Maurya is seen to justify as well as acquiesce the deaths of their male relatives stoically:

They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening.

Again, the way Nora and Cathleen manage to face the news of the deaths of Michael and later, of Bartley, or how they try to hide from their mother the information regarding the bundle of Michael's cloth show how strong and resilient the rural Irish women are.

### **Submission to Fate**

Synge's *Riders* not only highlights the valiant struggle of the inhabitants of the Aran Islands against the sea but also their submission to fate. They have resigned to their fate that they must live with sea even if it means regular deaths for the menfolk of the Islands. Thus, when Maurya has come to know of the death of Michael, she is waiting for the dead body to wash up so that they can give him a deep burial:

You'd do right to leave that rope, Bartley, hanging by the boards (Bartley takes the rope]). It will be wanting in this place, I'm telling you, if Michael is washed up to-morrow morning, or the next morning, or any morning in the week, for it's a deep grave we'll make him by the grace of God.

Maurya tries hard to dissuade her last surviving son from going over to Connemara. But the economic considerations force Bartley to ignore his mother's pleadings and Maurya accepts her fate:

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He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.

The deep trust of the Aran community in faith is also reflected in the speech of Cathleen when she asks her mother to go down to the spring well and she may "see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say "God speed you," the way he'll be easy in his mind."

However, the greatest sign of the Islanders' submission to fate is reflected in the famous speech of Maurya after the dead body of Bartley is brought home. She ignores the presence of everybody around her and accepts her fate as it comes:

They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening.

**SAQ**

What other important themes do you find in *Riders*? Discuss them in detail. (100 words)

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**2.6 *Riders to the Sea* as a Tragedy**

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According to Sanford Sternlicht (70), *Riders to the Sea* is the 'most tragic drama' composed by Synge and he is of the opinion that the tragedy

of this play is “the most ancient of all, the greatest grief: the death of the young before the old” (71). The tragedy presented in *Riders* is simple and straight-forward, but at the same time it is also sublime and universal in nature.

However, not everyone was ready to assign the status of a tragedy to *Riders* and James Joyce was one of them. In his letter to his brother Stanislaus, he clearly states, ‘I am glad to say that ever since I read it I have been riddling it mentally till it has [not] a sound spot. It is tragic about all the men that are drowned in the islands: but thanks be to God Synge is not an Aristotelian’ (Joyce 35). His objection was mainly against the brevity of the plot of *Riders* as well as its use of an animal to bring about the catastrophe. He was ready to regard it only as a tragic poem and not a tragedy proper—for him it represented what he termed a ‘dwarf drama’ (Ellmann 129).

In spite of James’ criticism of *Riders*, we may discern certain qualities in this play that qualifies it as a tragedy even from an Aristotelian perspective. Aristotle did not prescribe a tragedy in a one-act form because he had doubt if an inadequate length would stand in the way of achieving the necessary cathartic impulse. But if we go through Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, we shall find that the emphasis is not entirely on magnitude alone: ‘tragedy is mimesis of an action that is complete, whole, and of magnitude (for one can have a whole which lacks magnitude). A whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end’ (Aristotle 55). It has been pointed out that the length of *Riders* may lack magnitude, but it certainly is a mimesis of action that has a beginning, middle and an end (Collins 115) and this mimesis of action qualifies *Riders* as a tragedy.

Some critics have contrasted *Riders* with Greek and Shakespearean tragedy from the moral point of view and have questioned if it can be termed a tragedy proper. They have pointed out the supremacy of a system of values in both Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. According to Gilbert

Murray, “the ritual on which tragedy was based embodied the most fundamental Greek conception of life and fate, of law and sin and punishment” (61). These critics also talk of a similar ‘complex vision of good and evil’ dictating the course of Shakespearean tragedies. Dennis Donoghue, for instance, found no such moral vision in *Riders* and concludes that *Riders* cannot be termed a tragedy because it does not contain a significant equivalent of ‘the valued’. He also insists that Synge’s play fails to provide his audience with a sense of heightened life even as the sufferings of the ‘unconvincing protagonist’, Maurya, is governed by “forces which do not include her will or her character” (Donoghue 57).

However, Benson argues that there is a ‘value’, a ‘good’ in Synge’s *Riders* which has escaped the notice of many other critics simply because of their reluctance to modify the traditional definitions of tragedy (61). According to him, the ‘good’ in this play is to be found in death itself. Throughout the play, one may discover expressions of fear and apprehension about living as well as about dying. However, death which is attended by proper observance is never resented by any character in the play. Thus, we find the young priest advising Nora how to divulge the news of Michael’s death to her mother : “you can tell herself he’s got a clean burial by the grace of God”. Even Maurya has a plan for her dead son, “...if Michael is washed up to-morrow morning, or the next morning, or any morning in the week, for it’s a deep grave we’ll make him by the grace of God.” The last speech of Maurya also testifies to the fact that for the characters of *Riders* death is good:

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

But some other critics are of the view that while *Riders* is a tragedy, it is not a tragedy in the Greek or Shakespearean sense (Benson 60). In

both the Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, the combination of hamartia or the tragic flaw of the protagonist along with causally related events play the significant role in bringing about the unhappy catastrophe. But in *Riders to the Sea* we do not find hamartia or the causality as we find in *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet*. The deaths of neither Michael nor Bartley are the result of any tragic flaw in their characters. As a matter of fact, both the brothers become victims of death because of an arbitrary fate—a fact that brings *Riders* closer to irony than a tragedy proper (Benson 60).

Moreover, in *Riders* critics have discerned a form of tragedy that Ronan McDonald describes as ‘a pattern of response, a cultural structure through which profound loss is mediated and represented’ (27). According to Oona Flawley this particular pattern of tragedy is associated with the “peculiar and defining relationship that characters have with nature and landscape” (17) as well as ‘feminine tragedy’. The ‘sublime tragedy’ of *Riders* is also credited with renovating ‘notions of the dramatic in Irish theatre with a social realism that altered the perception and function of the woman on-stage, while highlighting expectations placed on Irish women off-stage; it also granted new dramatic importance to landscape and place by refusing simple idealisations of rural Ireland’ (17). From this point of view, Synge may be credited with doing for rural Ireland what James Joyce did for Dublin, the capital city of the country—to diagnose and represent a deep-seated ‘social malaise’.

**Check Your Progress**

Discuss how Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* differs from Aristotle’s concept of tragedy. ( in 200 words)

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## 2.7 Treatment of the Supernatural Elements in the Play

Supernatural elements play an important role in *Riders*. In fact, the very title of the play is based on a supernatural incident which Synge narrates in Part Four of his *The Aran Islands*:

When the horses were coming down to the slip an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn't say what she was after seeing, and this man caught the horse, he caught his own horse first, and then he caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned.

While this supernatural incident provided Synge the skeleton of the plot, it was a challenge to dramatize it and make it convincing for the modern audience. However, Synge manages to overcome this challenge by securing a willing suspension of disbelief from his audience. For this, he grounds his story with utmost faithfulness among the natives of the Aran Islands. The details of the everyday peasant life are simultaneously invested with archetypal associations that have validity for an audience seemingly far removed from any experience of peasant life (Benson 53).

Synge's masterclass in handling the supernatural is also evident in the way he makes the 'ghost story' in *Riders* appear convincing. For this again, he goes back to an incident narrated in Part Three of *The Aran Islands*:

Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pampooty on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.

Synge uses the realistic details of this incident on the subplot related to the death of Michael in order to make the 'ghost story' appear convincing to his audience. The details concerning the identification of the bundle of clothes as those of Michael's are so realistic that the distinction between natural and supernatural in this subplot gets blurred. Again, by making Nora and Cathleen doubt the authenticity of their mother's vision of Michael's



ghost, Synge 'skilfully presents an appearance of objectivity and reasonableness that allays our tendency to disbelieve' (Benson 53).

However, some critics have objected to Synge's handling of the supernatural in *Riders*. Malcolm Pittock, for instance, believes that *Riders* is a failure just because of the use of Maurya's vision of Michael's ghost. As he remarks, 'It is ... one thing for Maurya to see a vision and to believe that vision fulfilled, but quite another for a modern audience, formed in a different cultural pattern, to believe in such superstition with any real seriousness' (448). He complains that emotional response which the audience is expected to give to the vision is at odds with the detached and objective reality of Aran as they are shown it in the rest of the play. Pittock further continues, 'As a result the play is a mixture of tragedy and melodrama, that is to say it offers two incompatible attitudes to the experience it presents: one that takes it seriously and one that exploits it sensationally' (448). But many critics are not entirely convinced by the arguments of Pittock and are not willing to condemn Synge's play. Explaining why the vision does not interfere with our sense of the reality of the drama, Nicholas Grene points out that the strength of the play and its effectiveness depends not only on the skill of its construction, but also on symbolic echoes which relate it to basic sources in Irish culture. Although the action of the play is bare and simple, it is amplified by a network of oblique references which extend it in the minds of the audience to universal proportions(52). Your reading of the play must have already revealed that the atmosphere of *Riders* conforms to realistic conventions but this was actually the playwright's way of 'suturing the spectator within a familiar horizon' of realistic expectations. Grene has rightly pointed out that 'the supernatural in Synge is oddly matter-of-fact and un-mysterious' (54). Speaking about how Synge has managed to put together the elements of realism and supernaturalism in *Riders*, Christopher Collins remarks, "Synge knew that once his spectator was sufficiently comfortable with the familiar material referentiality of the stage picture, he could then complicate the objective truth of realism with those supernatural phenomena that permeated the material conditions of Inis Meáin" (116). The kind of realism that audience usually relates to cottage-kitchen plays has been masterfully subverted in *Riders* by 'accounting for the supernatural through nature, divination and death laments' that it may be classified as a tragedy of magical realism (Collins 116).

Space for Learner

**Check Your Progress**

1. Compare Synge's treatment of the supernatural with Shakespeare's treatment of the same in any of his major tragedies that you have read.

(200 words)

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2. Discuss how Synge grounds his story in *Riders* with utmost faithfulness among the natives of the Aran Islands. (100 words)

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**2.8 Language of the Play *Riders to the Sea***

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Synge's use of language in his plays is one of the most discussed topics among the critics. He wrote his plays in a dialect known as Hiberno-English and his choice of this dialect provided a solution to the national literary problem of Ireland in 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, at the same time his choice of this dialect also brought him international fame. According to T.S. Eliot, the plays of Synge are "based upon the idiom of a rural people whose speech is naturally poetic, both in imagery and rhythm." Eliot further observes that it is for this reason that Synge's peculiar language is "not available except for the plays set among the same people" and adds that Synge's choice of characters also contributed to the unique nature of language in his plays for he "wrote plays about characters whose originals in life talked poetically, so that he could make them talk poetry and remain real people" (Eliot 19,20) Synge had the innate belief that if Irish writers were to attract a world-wide readership, they must echo the Gaelic atmosphere in the native language:

It is difficult to say how far the Gaelic atmosphere which is now so powerful all through Ireland will bring a new note into the English language.

Every new movement of literature has a new note in language and every language that is spoken widely has these notes potentially without stint ... (Synge)

Synge's use of language in his plays, including *Riders* is often a 'direct translation' from the Irish of Aran which bears little similarity to the English peasantry of Wicklow (Kiberd 205). The following example from *Riders* will make the point clear:

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

We may discover the musical or poetical quality that Eliot talks about in the speeches of the various characters in the *Riders*. You may consider the following two speeches of Maurya and Nora respectively from *Riders* to as instances of this:

- (i) It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking.
- (ii) The young priest says he's known the like of it. "If it's Michael's they are," says he, "you can tell herself he's got a clean burial by the grace of God, and if they're not his, let no one say a word about them, for she'll be getting her death," says he, "with crying and lamenting."

Synge makes use of repetition, parallelism and symbolism in order to make his language in *Riders* to convey deeper meanings and evoke proper emotions :

If it wasn't found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. If it was a

hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?

**Stop to Consider**

When you go through the text of *Riders*, please pay attention to Synge's use of symbolism and metaphor to try to appreciate their significance in the play.

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**2.9 Discussing the Character of Maurya**

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In J.M. Synge's play, *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya is the central character and has been called "one of the first archetypal, all-suffering, all-sacrificing Irish mothers in modern Irish drama" (Sternlicht 70). She is an elderly woman and the mother of eight children. In her life she had to endure terrible losses of her husband and all her six sons to the sea. Maurya character embodies the struggle, resilience, and tragedy that the inhabitants of the Aran Islands have to endure primarily because of the treacherous nature of the sea.

Synge has presented Maurya as a strong-willed and determined character who can endure immense grief and hardship without complaint. She has developed a fatalistic outlook of life and has accepted all the deaths of her family as an inevitable part of coexistence with the dangerous sea. Thus, we find that even after receiving the news of Bartley's death, she retains her mental equilibrium that surprises her daughter Nora:

She's quiet now and easy; but the day Michael was drowned you could hear her crying out from this to the spring well. It's fonder she was of Michael, and would anyone have thought that?

Maurya is an embodiment of Everymother and throughout the play we find her main focus to be the safety of her last surviving son Bartley. She tries

her level best to prevent him from going to Connemara in rough weather. Her dialogue with Bartley not only reflects her maternal concerns but also go straight into the heart of the audience because of its sincerity and genuineness:

If it wasn't found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?

One may easily discern grandeur in the character of Maurya, “a poetic method of expression and imagery that illuminates her sublimity” (Krasner 176). She possesses a linguistic sublime that she presents through her description of her children’s death and an indifferent acceptance of fate that bears a close proximity to what Immanuel Kant calls the “astonishment bordering on terror, the horror and the awesome shudder , which grip the spectator when viewing mountain ranges towering to the heavens” (Kant 152). Although Maurya has lost all her sons and husband to the sea, she retains her dignity and ‘speaks with imagery’—qualities that reinforces the impression of grandeur that her character evokes. Her situation has all the qualities to turn her character into a melodramatic excess, but the artist in Synge ensures that her character never degenerates into a whimpering, shrieking mother.

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## **2.10 Summing Up**

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In conclusion, we may say that *Riders to the Sea* is poignant tragedy that deals with the themes of loss, grief and relentless power of the sea. But Synge’s *Riders* is not a tragedy of Maurya alone, rather it is a universal tragedy that encompasses the life of all marginalised people. Synge uses the mundane details of the life on the Aran Islands to create a tragedy that reminds us of the fragility of human existence and the enduring spirit that arises in the face of adversity.

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**Unit 3 : J. M. Synge: *Riders to the Sea***

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Supplementary Unit

**Unit Structure:**

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Critical Reception
- 3.4 Other Study Suggestions
- 3.5 A note on Language
- 3.6 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers
- 3.7 Summing up
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

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**3.1 Objectives**

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The objective of this unit is to provide you with good supplementary material to go along with your reading of the text, which is the drama *Riders to the Sea*. Here you shall have a brief introduction to the author and the drama, followed by sections on the critical reception, important supplementary texts, a short summary and sample essay type solved questions. The subsequent sections further aim to provide you with details about the use of language in the text and its social context, before ending with a comprehensive summary. In between the sections, there are “Stop to Consider” parts in order to give you some extra interesting tidbits on the prescribed text and its related areas. I will attempt to also engage your retention capacities by providing short answer questions with given word limits after each section. This is aimed at enabling you to test yourself by summarizing these ideas in your own words in a concise and lucid manner. Finally, I have also provided “know your progress” sections with several Masters’ level essay type questions each in order for you to get acquainted with the examination scenario and practice. The summary at the end of the unit is aimed at jogging your memory and allowing you to have these ideas at your disposal to incorporate in your own creative arguments. All in all, by the end of this Unit, you will be able to-

- *Remember* the key details involved in the understanding of the text
- *Understand* the various movements and debates involved in the literary arena surrounding the text
- *Apply* this knowledge further to various Literary and theoretical works you will find in your literary career
- *Analyse* the ethos of the critical and theoretical ideas involved in the play, as a lens of interpretation
- *Create* your own ideas regarding unique nature of Synge's writing and why his writing is considered as a milestone in the literature of his country and the world in general.

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### 3.2 Introduction

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J.M. Synge (full name John Millington Synge) was an Irish playwright, poet, and prose writer who made a significant impact on Irish literature in the early 20th century. Born on April 16, 1871, in Rathfarnham, near Dublin, Synge grew up in a wealthy Protestant family. His upbringing in a middle-class background provided him with opportunities for education and travel, which ultimately influenced his literary career. His literary journey began with his exploration of music and literature during his time at Trinity College, Dublin, where he studied music and literary history. However, it was during his stay in Germany, from 1893 to 1897, that he found a deep appreciation for the works of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen's realistic dramas left a lasting impression on Synge and greatly influenced his own writing style.

Upon returning to Ireland, Synge became involved with the Irish Literary Revival, a cultural and artistic movement aimed at reclaiming and celebrating Ireland's distinctive cultural heritage. He immersed himself in the Irish language and folklore, traveling extensively throughout the west of Ireland, where he encountered the rural communities that would become the inspiration for his most renowned works.

Synge's literary career gained momentum with the production of his first play, *In the Shadow of the Glen* in 1903. Although it drew mixed reviews, the play set the stage for his subsequent contributions to Irish drama. However, it was his masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World* first performed in 1907, that solidified his reputation as a leading figure in Irish literature. It caused significant controversy upon its debut due

to its portrayal of rural Irish life. The play centers around a young man who becomes a local hero after allegedly killing his abusive father, only to face the consequences when his father reappears alive. The provocative themes and the portrayal of Irish characters as flawed and complex drew fierce criticism from conservative nationalists, leading to riots and disruptions during the play's early performances. Nonetheless, it also garnered praise for its innovative use of language, its exploration of social and psychological complexities, and its realistic depiction of rural Irish communities.

Following the success of *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge continued to produce remarkable works that delved into the lives of rural Irish people. One such work is *Riders to the Sea* a one-act play, first performed in 1904. *Riders to the Sea* explores themes of fate, grief, and the powerlessness of humanity against the forces of nature. It showcases Synge's ability to capture the raw emotions of his characters and his poetic language rooted in the Irish vernacular. The play, although initially met with controversy, has since been recognized as a significant contribution to Irish drama and a powerful representation of the struggles faced by rural communities. Synge's literary output also extended beyond plays. He wrote insightful travel essays, prose sketches, and poetry, showcasing his talent for capturing the essence of the Irish landscape and its people. His works often drew from his firsthand experiences and encounters with the inhabitants of the western Irish islands, providing a vivid and authentic portrayal of Irish life. Sadly, Synge's prolific literary career was cut short by his untimely death on March 24, 1909, at the age of 37 due to Hodgkin's disease. Despite his relatively short time as a writer, his contributions to Irish literature and drama remain significant. Synge's innovative and realistic portrayals of rural Irish life challenged the conventional norms of Irish drama and paved the way for subsequent generations of Irish playwrights.

Today, J.M. Synge is celebrated as one of the foremost figures of the Irish Literary Revival, alongside other luminaries such as William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory. His works continue to be studied, performed, and appreciated for their profound exploration of Irish identity, their linguistic richness, and their keen observation of human nature. Synge's literary career serves as a testament to the enduring power of literature in shaping cultural movements and challenging societal norms.

Written in 1904, *Riders to the Sea* is a one-act tragedy that captures the essence of the Irish dramatic tradition and showcases Synge's

exceptional ability to depict the raw emotions and harsh realities faced by the inhabitants of a remote coastal community. The play serves as a microcosm of the human experience, presenting a narrative that explores themes of fate, grief, and the powerlessness of humanity in the face of the natural world. The central figure of the play is Maurya, a weathered and wise woman who has suffered immeasurable loss. Having already lost her husband and four sons to the treacherous sea, Maurya is haunted by a deep sense of grief and resignation. She possesses a prophetic gift, able to predict the deaths of her loved ones through vivid dreams. This foreknowledge further compounds the family's sense of powerlessness, as they find themselves trapped in a cycle of tragedy and sorrow. The island itself becomes a character in its own right, representing both the provider and the taker of life. The sea, which surrounds the island, acts as a relentless force, both sustaining the community through fishing and agriculture, and mercilessly claiming the lives of those who depend on it. The constant presence of the sea permeates every scene of the play, reminding the characters and the audience of the ever-looming threat that nature poses.

Synge's language in *Riders to the Sea* is rich and poetic, evoking the rugged beauty of the Irish landscape and the hauntingly melancholic atmosphere that surrounds the Maurya family. Through sparse yet powerful dialogue, he masterfully captures the essence of the characters' emotions, their pain, and their resignation in the face of their inevitable fate. The play also explores the bonds of family and community. Maurya's two surviving daughters, Cathleen and Nora, provide support and solace to their mother as they collectively grapple with their grief.

Their conversations reveal their shared fears, worries, and a resigned acceptance of their circumstances. Synge presents these women as resilient and stoic, reflecting the strength and endurance of the Irish people in the face of adversity.

*Riders to the Sea* stands as a testament to the enduring power of tragedy in dramatic literature. It serves as a reflection on the human condition, reminding us of the fragility of existence and the harsh realities that confront us. Through his exploration of fate and loss, Synge compels us to contemplate the limits of human agency and the inherent struggles we face against the natural forces that shape our lives.

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **Some Interesting facts about Synge**

1. Synge spent significant time on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland, immersing himself in the local culture and collecting stories and folklore. His experiences there greatly influenced his works, particularly his famous play *The Playboy of the Western World*
2. *The Playboy of the Western World* sparked controversy and riots during its initial performance at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1907. The portrayal of Irish characters and its satirical take on societal norms provoked strong reactions from the audience, leading to a heated response and disruptions during the early performances.
3. Synge was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly Nietzsche's concept of the "superman" or "Übermensch." This influence is evident in Synge's exploration of individualism and rebellion against societal conventions in his plays.
4. Synge had a close friendship and artistic collaboration with renowned Irish poet and playwright W.B. Yeats. Yeats greatly supported Synge's work and played a significant role in ensuring the production and success of his plays.
5. Synge had a keen interest in photography and often carried a camera during his travels. He captured numerous images of the Irish countryside, local people, and landscapes, which provided him with visual inspiration for his writings.
6. Synge played a vital role in the Gaelic Revival, a cultural and literary movement that sought to revive Irish language, traditions, and folklore. His works, with their use of authentic Irish dialects and portrayal of rural Irish life, contributed to the resurgence of Irish cultural identity.
7. Synge's writing career was cut short due to ill health. He was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease in his early thirties and passed away at the age of 37. Despite his short life, Synge made a lasting impact on Irish literature.

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### **3.3 Critical Reception**

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J.M. Synge's play, *Riders to the Sea*, has garnered significant attention and critical acclaim since its first performance in 1904. Over the

years, scholars, reviewers, and theater enthusiasts have analyzed and interpreted the play, examining its themes, language, and portrayal of the human condition. This section will provide you with a comprehensive analysis of the critical reception of *Riders to the Sea* and explore the various perspectives and insights offered by critics.

Upon its debut, *Riders to the Sea* faced a mixture of praise and controversy. Some critics commended Synge's ability to capture the essence of rural Irish life and the raw emotions of the characters. They lauded the play's poetic language, its evocative atmosphere, and its exploration of themes such as fate, grief, and the powerlessness of humanity. These early reviews recognized the play's impact in portraying the harsh realities faced by the inhabitants of remote coastal communities. However, the play also encountered resistance from some quarters due to its stark depiction of Irish life and its departure from traditional Irish drama. Critics argued that Synge's portrayal of the Irish people as passive victims of fate was overly pessimistic and lacked a sense of agency. There were debates about whether the play perpetuated stereotypes or offered an honest reflection of the hardships faced by rural communities.

Over time, critical interpretations of *Riders to the Sea* have evolved, reflecting changing perspectives and scholarly insights. One dominant theme that emerges from these interpretations is the play's exploration of the human struggle against the forces of nature. Critics have analyzed the symbolic significance of the sea, highlighting its dual role as both provider and destroyer. The sea is seen as a representation of the relentless cycle of life and death, underscoring humanity's vulnerability in the face of nature's power.

Furthermore, scholars have examined the play's use of language and its poetic qualities. Synge's lyrical dialogue, rooted in the Irish vernacular, has been a subject of admiration. Critics have praised the play's ability to evoke a sense of place and atmosphere, capturing the essence of the rugged Irish landscape and the emotional turmoil of the characters. The language is seen as an integral part of the play's power to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Another significant aspect of critical analysis focuses on the play's portrayal of gender roles and the resilience of the female characters. Maurya and her daughters, Cathleen and Nora, have been subjects of scholarly exploration. Critics have commended Synge for presenting strong, stoic female characters who navigate the hardships of life

with resilience and grace. The women's roles as caregivers, mourners, and preservers of their community's traditions have been examined through feminist and gender-based lenses.

Additionally, *Riders to the Sea* has been studied in the context of Irish nationalism and the Irish literary revival. Scholars have explored how the play reflects the socio-political climate of Ireland during the early 20th century. Synge's departure from the romanticized portrayal of Irish life prevalent in earlier Irish dramas has been seen as a significant contribution to the broader cultural and artistic movement seeking to reclaim and celebrate Ireland's authentic voice. The critical reception of *Riders to the Sea* has been a via a wide variety of interpretations, debates, and insights. From its early controversies to its subsequent recognition as a powerful piece of Irish drama, the play has captured the imagination of critics and audiences alike. Synge's ability to depict the human struggle against nature, his poetic language, and his portrayal of resilient female characters have been recurring themes in critical analysis. Moreover, the play's place within the context of Irish nationalism and the Irish literary revival has deepened our understanding of its cultural significance.

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### **Stop to Consider**

Here are some specific opinions of specialists on Synge-

1. David Cairns and Shaun Richards, in *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* acknowledge the important role of Synge's writing in the fields of postcolonial and gender studies.
2. Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland*, considers how Synge parodied Irish nationalist values, which was not always realistic in nature. Kiberd believes he thus endorsed the imaginary at the expense of the real.
3. Nicholas Grene, in *The Politics of Irish Drama*, stated that Synge's heavily ironic mode of representation never allowed any idea to go unchallenged.
4. Christopher Murray, in his essay "Beyond the Passion Machine", believes that Synge was in conflict with himself, his class, his religion, and aspects of Irish life that he found detestable- this is why he wrote with an ironic detachment

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5. Ondrej Pilny, in his book *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama*, mentions that one of the defining characteristics of Synge's writing was the complicating of the issue of national and individual identity.

**SAQ**

1. What were some early criticisms of *Riders to the Sea*? (60 words)

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2. How has the play been analyzed in terms of gender roles and female characters? (60 words)

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### 3.4 Other Study Suggestions

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*1. Synge and the Irish Language* by Declan Kiberd offers profound insights into understanding the works of J.M. Synge. Kiberd's exploration of the complex relationship between Synge's writings and the Irish language will give you a compelling framework for comprehending the nuances and cultural significance of his plays, prose, and poetry. By examining Synge's use of Irish idioms, linguistic expressions, and the influence of Gaelic literature and folklore, Kiberd will show you how the Irish language serves as a rich source of inspiration and texture within Synge's work. This book will also help you appreciate the depth of Synge's engagement with Irish culture and his deliberate efforts to incorporate the language into his writing. It shall further uncover the intricate interplay between language, identity, and artistic expression, ultimately enhancing your understanding of Synge's artistic vision and his profound impact on Irish literature. Thus from *Synge and the Irish Language* you shall gain a deeper appreciation for the cultural and linguistic contexts that shaped Synge's writing, further enriching your interpretation and enjoyment of his literary contributions.

*2. Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School, 1991-2000* edited by Nicholas Grene is highly valuable for students to



understand the works of J.M. Synge. This collection of essays essentially brings together a wide array of critical perspectives and scholarly analyses from the annual Synge Summer School, which will provide you with a comprehensive and multifaceted exploration of his writing. The students will get to take a deep dive into various aspects of Synge's works, including his poetry, prose and plays, and their cultural, literary and historical contexts. The pieces incorporated here cover a wide range of themes, such from the Irish language to gender dynamics and nationalism, along with the relationship between Synge and prominent literary figures. You will be presented with diverse viewpoints, interpretations, and methodologies giving you access to a rich and nuanced understanding of Synge's artistic vision and the enduring significance of his work. It serves as a valuable resource for students, scholars, and enthusiasts who wish to critically engage with Synge's writings. This is acknowledged as an indispensable addition to scholarship on Synge and a key tool for uncovering the multifaceted layers of meaning in his literary oeuvre.

**3. *Fool of the Family: A Life of J.M. Synge* by W.J. McCormack** is an essential and insightful biography that provides a comprehensive understanding of J.M. Synge's life, works, and the socio-cultural context in which he operated. This book will particularly help you to grasp the complexities of Synge as both an individual and an artist. McCormack delves into Synge's personal background, exploring his privileged upbringing, his education, and his early experiences that shaped his worldview. With an in-depth view into Synge's personal life, including his struggles with illness and his relationships with family and friends, you can achieve a nuanced portrait of the man behind the literary works. Additionally, McCormack examines Synge's artistic development, tracing his journey from his early forays into literature to his pivotal role in the Irish Literary Revival. He also provides in-depth analyses of Synge's major works, including his plays, prose, and poetry, unraveling the thematic and stylistic choices that defined his writing. Through meticulous research and critical insights, McCormack situates Synge's works within the broader literary and cultural movements of the time, shedding light on the influences that shaped his artistic vision. This book also delves into the socio-political landscape of early 20th-century Ireland, which shall give you a deeper understanding of the historical context in which Synge operated. McCormack explores the tensions and conflicts between Irish nationalism, cultural revivalism, and the British colonial presence, illustrating how these

dynamics influenced Synge's work and reception. By examining the social and political currents of the time, McCormack offers valuable insights into the motivations and impact of Synge's artistic contributions.

**4. *J.M. Synge and his World* by Robin Skelton** is an invaluable resource for understanding the life, works, and cultural milieu of J.M. Synge. Skelton's book provides a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of Synge's literary achievements, contextualizing them within the broader social, historical, and artistic landscape of early 20th-century Ireland. By delving into Synge's upbringing, education, and intellectual influences, you will receive crucial insights into the formative experiences that shaped the playwright's artistic vision. One of the book's notable strengths lies in its examination of Synge's interactions with key figures of the Irish Literary Revival, such as W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Douglas Hyde. Skelton illuminates the impact of these relationships on Synge's development as a writer, shedding light on the collaborative nature of the literary movement and the cultural and political climate that informed Synge's work. You shall also get an idea of Synge's plays within the context of the Abbey Theatre, exploring the theater's founding, its commitment to promoting Irish drama, and the controversies surrounding Synge's works within its walls. Students will also delve into the thematic richness of Synge's writing, exploring recurring motifs such as the exploration of rural Irish life, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the complexities of Irish identity. The philosophical underpinnings of Synge's plays, students will see how the playwright grappled with existential questions, the nature of art, and the role of the artist in society. Skelton's analysis will enhance your understanding of the philosophical depths embedded within Synge's seemingly simple narratives. Synge's fascination with folklore, mythology, and the Irish language, will illustrate for you how these elements influenced his characterization, dialogue, and portrayal of the Irish landscape. By exploring these cultural and linguistic dimensions, you will gain a deeper appreciation for the intricate interplay between language, culture, and artistic expression in his writing.

**5. *J.M. Synge: Four Plays: A Casebook* by Ronald Ayling** offers a deep exploration of Synge's four major plays- *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Tinker's Wedding*. You shall get a detailed analysis of each play, including their themes, characters, language, and dramatic techniques, which shall be

even more helpful for your prescribed text. Ayling allows students to grasp Synge's writing, his artistic vision and extra-textual contexts in which he worked. You shall view new critical perspectives and detailed discussions of themes and characters, providing insights into the complexities of Synge's writing, as well as the psychological and societal dimensions of his works. This book also examines the historical backdrop against which these plays were written, revealing how Synge's exploration of rural Irish life, the position of women, and the clash between tradition and modernity reflect the tensions and transformations of early 20th-century Ireland. You will also get a range of scholarly essays from various perspectives offering interpretations and examinations of Synge's works, presenting a multiplicity of viewpoints and critical approaches helping you to formulate your own creative ideas critically. This diversity of voices enriches the student's understanding by offering nuanced insights into the plays, encouraging engagement and further exploration.

*Space for Learner*

### **Check Your Progress**

1. Analyze the theme of the powerlessness of humanity against the forces of nature in *Riders to the Sea*. How does the constant presence of the sea as an antagonist shape the experiences and fates of the characters in the play? Provide specific examples from the text to support your analysis.
2. Discuss the role of grief and loss in *Riders to the Sea*. How do the characters, particularly Maurya, Nora, and Cathleen, navigate and cope with the overwhelming tragedies they have endured? Explore the ways in which the play portrays the cyclical nature of life, the inevitability of death, and the characters' fatalistic attitudes towards tragedy.
3. Examine the significance of the sea as a symbol in *Riders to the Sea*. How does it represent both life-sustaining and life-threatening aspects for the characters? Analyze the sea's influence on the lives and emotions of Maurya, Bartley, and the island community as a whole, and discuss how it contributes to the overall themes and atmosphere of the play.
4. Discuss the portrayal of gender dynamics and the roles of women in *Riders to the Sea*. Explore the characters of Maurya, Nora, and

Cathleen, and examine how they navigate their responsibilities, sacrifices, and sources of strength within the context of a patriarchal rural community. Analyze how their roles contribute to the overall themes and messages conveyed by the play.

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### 3.5 A Note on Language

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J.M. Synge, known for his mastery of language, exhibits a remarkable command over words in his play *Riders to the Sea*. With its poetic qualities and rich use of the Irish vernacular, Synge's language plays a vital role in enhancing the emotional depth, atmospheric portrayal, and thematic exploration of the play.

One of the notable aspects of Synge's language in *Riders to the Sea* is its lyrical quality. The dialogue and monologues flow with a rhythmic cadence that mimics the ebb and flow of the sea. This musicality adds a layer of beauty and resonance to the words spoken by the characters, heightening the emotional impact on the audience. The lyrical nature of the language not only engages the senses but also reinforces the themes of the cyclical nature of life, the relentless power of the sea, and the characters' profound connection to their environment.

Additionally, Synge's use of the Irish vernacular is a distinctive feature of his writing in *Riders to the Sea*. By incorporating local idioms, expressions, and dialects into the dialogue, he captures the authentic voice of the Irish people and reflects the cultural specificities of the play's setting. The Irish vernacular adds depth, authenticity, and a sense of rootedness to the characters' voices, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the world of rural Irish life. This linguistic authenticity not only serves as a means of cultural representation but also fosters a greater understanding and connection between the audience and the characters. Synge's use of language in *Riders to the Sea* is also significant in its ability to vividly portray the Irish landscape and atmosphere. Through his descriptive prowess, he brings to life the rugged coastlines, the vastness of the sea, and the barrenness of the islands. The imagery employed in his language evokes a sense of place, transporting the audience to the remote and windswept Aran Islands. The audience can almost taste the salt in the air, feel the cool breeze on their faces, and sense the looming presence of the sea. Synge's

language serves as a powerful tool in creating an immersive experience, allowing the audience to viscerally connect with the natural surroundings that shape the lives of the characters.

Moreover, Synge's language in *Riders to the Sea* conveys the depth of human emotions, particularly grief, resignation, and acceptance. The characters' dialogue and monologues are crafted with precision to capture the raw intensity of their experiences. Synge employs vivid imagery, metaphors, and similes to evoke the characters' emotional states, enabling the audience to empathize with their profound sense of loss and the weight of their circumstances. Through his language, Synge enables a profound exploration of the human condition, eliciting a range of emotions and fostering a deep understanding of the characters' struggles and resilience.

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### 3.6 Probable Questions and Suggested Answers

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1. Discuss the theme of fate and its manifestation in J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*. How does the play explore the inevitability of destiny and the powerlessness of humanity against the forces of nature?

**Ans-** In *Riders to the Sea*, J.M. Synge delves deeply into the theme of fate, emphasizing the relentless and inevitable nature of destiny. The play revolves around Maurya's family, who are portrayed as victims of the sea, a powerful force that governs their lives. The sea acts as a metaphor for the forces of nature, and the play explores the idea that fate is inescapable.

Throughout the play, the characters repeatedly face losses and deaths due to their connection to the sea, emphasizing the deterministic nature of their lives. Maurya, the matriarch of the family, possesses a prophetic gift that enables her to foresee the deaths of her loved ones. This gift not only highlights the theme of fate but also serves to accentuate the characters' powerlessness in the face of destiny.

Maurya's acceptance of her family's fate and her stoic resignation further underline the play's exploration of human powerlessness against the forces of nature. She understands the cyclical nature of life and death, recognizing that death is an inevitable part of their lives. This acceptance is seen when she remarks, "No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied." Furthermore, the sea itself acts as a symbol of the larger

forces of nature, representing an indifferent and unforgiving power. It is portrayed as both a provider and a destroyer, reflecting the dual nature of life and death. The repeated losses suffered by the Maurya family emphasize the insignificance of human agency when confronted with the immense power of the natural world. Synge's vivid and poetic language enhances the portrayal of the sea and its destructive power. Through his carefully crafted descriptions, the sea becomes an omnipotent and omnipresent force, ever-present in the lives of the characters. This is clear in Maurya's relief as she states, "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me". The play also explores the theme of the powerlessness of humanity against the forces of nature through the characters' reactions and responses to their tragic circumstances. The Maurya family, despite their grief and loss, maintain a sense of resignation and acceptance. They acknowledge their inability to control or alter the course of events, understanding that their lives are at the mercy of the sea.

The above analysis makes it clear that *Riders to the Sea* is a powerful exploration of the theme of fate and the powerlessness of humanity against the forces of nature. The play highlights the inevitability of destiny through the characters' losses and Maurya's prophetic dreams. The sea, symbolizing the larger forces of nature, represents the relentless cycle of life and death. Synge's poetic language and the characters' acceptance of their fate serve to emphasize the play's exploration of human powerlessness in the face of a predetermined destiny. Ultimately, the play prompts contemplation of the fragility of human existence and the indomitable power of nature.

2. Analyze the role of women in *Riders to the Sea* and discuss how the female characters embody strength, resilience, and sacrifice in the face of tragedy and loss.

**Ans-** In J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* the female characters play a pivotal role in portraying the strength, resilience, and sacrifice exhibited by women in the face of immense tragedy and loss. Through the characters of Maurya, Cathleen, and Nora, Synge presents a powerful representation of the indomitable spirit of women facing the harsh reality of their lives.

Maurya, as the matriarch of the family, stands as the embodiment of strength and wisdom. She has endured the deaths of her husband and four sons, and her experiences have shaped her into a weathered and resilient

woman. Despite the constant sorrow and death surrounding her, Maurya remains resolute and accepts her family's fate with stoicism. Her ability to foresee the deaths of her loved ones through prophetic dreams demonstrates her deep understanding of the cyclical nature of life and death. Her knowledge of the sea and its dangers further highlights her role as a guardian and protector of her family. Maurya's strength lies not only in her ability to endure loss but also in her ability to provide comfort and guidance to her daughters during their moments of grief. Cathleen and Nora, Maurya's daughters, also exhibit remarkable resilience in the face of tragedy. They provide unwavering support and care for their mother while coping with their own grief. Cathleen, in particular, takes on the responsibility of managing the household and protecting her family's interests. She displays immense strength in shouldering these burdens, ensuring the survival and well-being of her family. Cathleen's selflessness and devotion to her mother and sister reflect the deep bonds of love and loyalty within the family. Nora, the younger daughter, also demonstrates strength and resilience in her own way. Despite her youth, she possesses a sense of maturity and understanding beyond her years. Nora displays a quiet determination and a willingness to take on responsibilities, such as collecting the wages of their brother, Bartley. Her presence provides a source of comfort and support to both Maurya and Cathleen, strengthening the familial bonds in the face of adversity.

Throughout the play, the women of *Riders to the Sea* make numerous sacrifices for the well-being of their family and community. They bear the weight of grief and loss while maintaining a sense of dignity and grace. Their sacrifices extend beyond their personal sorrows and encompass the preservation of traditions and cultural heritage. The women take on the role of caregivers, preserving the memory of their lost loved ones and ensuring the continuation of their family's way of life. Synge's portrayal of these female characters challenges traditional gender stereotypes prevalent during the time of the play's creation. Instead of being passive victims, they actively engage with their circumstances and display resilience and strength in the face of adversity. The women in *Riders to the Sea* embody the enduring spirit of women in rural Irish communities, who navigate the hardships of life with grace and fortitude.

Thus, we can ultimately state that the female characters in *Riders to the Sea* exemplify strength, resilience, and sacrifice in the face of tragedy

and loss. Through the characters of Maurya, Cathleen, and Nora, J.M. Synge presents a powerful depiction of the indomitable spirit of women in the midst of overwhelming challenges. Their unwavering determination, selflessness, and ability to shoulder burdens reflect the profound strength of women in the face of adversity. Finally, the play pays tribute to the resilience and sacrifices of women, serving as a reminder of the vital role they play in navigating the hardships of life and preserving the bonds of family and community.

3. Discuss the significance of language and its poetic qualities in *Riders to the Sea*. How does J.M. Synge's use of language enhance the portrayal of the Irish landscape, emotions, and the themes of the play?

**Ans-** J.M. Synge's use of language in *Riders to the Sea* holds great significance, as it enhances the portrayal of the Irish landscape, evokes emotions, and explores the themes of the play in a profound and impactful manner. Through his carefully crafted dialogue and lyrical prose, Synge captures the essence of the Irish vernacular, creating a rich linguistic tapestry that resonates with the audience.

One of the key ways in which Synge's use of language enhances the portrayal of the Irish landscape is through vivid and evocative descriptions. His poetic language paints a detailed and immersive picture of the rugged coastlines, the wild and tempestuous sea, and the barren islands that serve as the backdrop for the play. Through his lyrical prose, Synge transports the audience to the remote, windswept landscapes of the Aran Islands, allowing them to experience the beauty, isolation, and harshness of these natural surroundings. Synge's language not only portrays the physical aspects of the landscape but also captures its spiritual and symbolic dimensions. He infuses his descriptions with imagery and metaphors that evoke a sense of the sublime, reflecting the awe-inspiring power of nature. The sea, for example, is often depicted as a living, breathing entity, simultaneously providing and taking life. By employing such vivid language, Synge conveys the deep connection between the characters and their environment, reinforcing the play's themes of the cyclical nature of life and the relentless power of the sea.

Furthermore, Synge's use of language heightens the emotional impact of the play, enabling the audience to connect deeply with the characters'



experiences. The dialogue and monologues are carefully crafted to capture the depths of grief, resignation, and acceptance that the characters grapple with. Through the rhythmic cadence and musicality of his language, Synge evokes a range of emotions, from sorrow and despair to moments of fleeting hope and tenderness. The poetic qualities of Synge's language also contribute to the exploration of the play's themes. His lyrical prose allows for a nuanced and layered exploration of fate, grief, and the powerlessness of humanity against the forces of nature. Through the poetic medium, Synge delves into the universal human experience, illuminating the fragility of existence and the inherent struggles faced by individuals when confronted with the inevitability of loss. Moreover, Synge's use of the Irish vernacular adds authenticity and depth to the characters' voices, making them relatable and believable. By incorporating local idioms, dialects, and expressions into the dialogue, Synge captures the unique essence of the Irish people and their way of communication. This linguistic authenticity not only contributes to the cultural representation of the play but also fosters a deeper connection between the audience and the characters, enhancing the emotional resonance and empathy.

In conclusion, J.M. Synge's use of language in *Riders to the Sea* is of profound significance, as it enhances the portrayal of the Irish landscape, evokes emotions, and explores the play's themes. Through his lyrical prose, vivid descriptions, and incorporation of the Irish vernacular, Synge creates a rich and immersive experience for the audience, allowing them to intimately connect with the characters, their environment, and the universal themes of loss, fate, and the powerlessness of humanity. Synge's language becomes a powerful tool in conveying the essence of the play, evoking a range of emotions, and fostering a deeper understanding of the human condition in the face of the indomitable forces of nature.

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### **3.7 Summing Up**

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In this Unit, you have learnt in the first section that J.M. Synge, a renowned Irish playwright, poet, and prose writer, left a significant impact on Irish literature in the early 20th century. His play, *Riders to the Sea*, captures the human struggle against nature and the inevitability of loss. Set on a small island off the west coast of Ireland, the play revolves around the Maurya family's tragedies inflicted by the sea. Synge's use of rich and poetic language evokes the emotions and atmosphere of the Irish

landscape, creating a sense of melancholy and resignation. In the second section, you have gotten a brief overview of the varied critical reception of the play. While it received praise for its portrayal of rural Irish life and its poetic language, it also faced controversy for its departure from traditional drama. Critics have analyzed themes such as the struggle against nature, the symbolic significance of the sea, and the exploration of gender roles. You have also seen how the play has been studied in the context of Irish nationalism and the literary revival, highlighting its contribution to reclaiming Ireland's authentic voice.

The following section that deals with Synge's mastery of language in *Riders to the Sea* demonstrates how the lyrical quality of the dialogue and monologues mirrors the ebb and flow of the sea, intensifying the emotional impact on the audience. By incorporating the Irish vernacular, you have read how Synge captures the authentic voice of the Irish people and deepens the connection between the audience and the rural Irish setting. His descriptive prowess vividly portrays the Irish landscape, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the natural surroundings. The language finally, is shown to convey the characters' profound emotions through vivid imagery, metaphors, and similes, exploring themes of grief, resignation, and acceptance.

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### 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

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- Bickley, Francis. *J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement*. Russell and Russell, 1968.
- Howe, P. P. *J. M. Synge, A Critical Study*. 1969.
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- Thornton, Weldon. *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind*. Colin Smythe, 1979.

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**Unit 4 : John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger***  
**(Introduction and Stage History)**

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*Space for Learner*

**Unit Structure:**

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Sources
- 4.4 Contexts of the play
  - 4.4.1 Socio-political context
  - 4.4.2 Angry Young Men Movement
  - 4.4.3 Post war British Theatre
  - 4.4.4 Kitchen Sink Drama
- 4.5 Stage Productions of the play
- 4.6 Adaptations of the play
- 4.7 Biography of the Author
- 4.8 Summing Up
- 4.9 References and Suggested Readings

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**4.1 Objectives:**

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In this Unit, you will be able to–

- *learn* about the date and sources of the play
- *consider* the various contexts of the play
- *understand* how the play was staged variously at various times
- *learn* about the biography of the author.

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**4.2 Introduction**

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*Look Back in Anger* is one of the most popular plays by John Osborne. Although, it didn't transform British theatre overnight, it did set the path for it to do so with its theme of alienation and identity in 1950s England. The play, which was thought to be modern for the time, shocked the theatre community with its sombre portrayal of Jimmy Porter, the protagonist as an ordinary man who has nothing to live for but his ideals—

ideals that are wrapped up in hate and anger. The play acts as a replica of the story of Britain in which the poor conditions of the country is reflected in the conflict between the characters. Michael Billington, a journalist of The Guardian, expressed this idea acutely: “Its premiere [of *Look Back in Anger*] at the Royal Court in May 1956 not only put the English Stage Company on the map, but proved to a generation of contemporary writers that it was possible to put contemporary Britain on stage” (qtd. in Heilpern 186). The play not only fostered the term “angry young man” but is also regarded as one of the earliest examples of “kitchen sink drama” because of its depiction of brutal realism. Also a notable body of critical scholarship has further contributed to the significance of the play in Modern British theatre across the globe. This unit along with the other two that will follow enable the readers to understand the different aspects of the play—social and cultural background, form, characters, themes, performance and stage history—in its entirety.

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### 4.3 Sources

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Osborne started writing *Look Back in Anger* in May 1955 and finished it in just seventeen days. The play was largely autobiographical in nature and was dedicated to his beloved father who confronted a premature death. Osborne’s unfortunate marriage to Pamela Lane, which occurred while he was intensely committed to his work and theatre, served as an inspiration for the play’s main plot. It also reflected their life in a constricted accommodation in Derby. Lane who was more pragmatic and materialistic and did not take Osborne’s ambition seriously, betrayed him with a local dentist. Initially, Osborne contemplated different titles for the play—*My Blood is a Mile High*, *Angry Man*, *Farewell to Anger*, *Man in a Rage*—before settling upon *Look Back in Anger*, a title that embodied its basic theme.

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### 4.4 Contexts of the play

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#### 4.4.1 Socio-political context

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After the end of World War 2 in 1945, Britain faced the challenge of repairing its infrastructure—after German bombs had obliterated it—and supporting a faltering economy. These issues contributed to Britain’s withdrawal from its colonies in India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Subsequently, the 1956 Suez Crisis, in

which Britain invaded Egypt and ultimately withdrew under political and economic duress shed light on the decline of Britain's competency as a world power. Furthermore at home, the Education Act of 1945 mandated free secondary education for all students above the age of fifteen, which contributed to an increase in educated pupils and made education more accessible. Particularly, the working-class students grew more conscious of their place in British society. However, the lack of opportunities led to the demoralization of the working-class students. As noted by Arthur Marwick in his book *British Society Since 1945* what it meant to be a working-class in 1950s Britain:

...to be a working class meant performing manual work...or just plain boring circumstances. ...When it came to 'life chances' members of the working class were still at a disadvantage compared with all of the rest of the society. ...Class is a difficult and messy subject, but indisputably neither the upheavals of the Second World War nor the programmed of the Labor Government abolished it. (43-44)

In fact, Marwick adds that the issue of social background actually initiated a very strong subjective element: the class inequality. He remarks, "if we are to compare the significance of class with that of other sources of distinction and inequality.[...], class stands [...]out as a key factor in such matters as wealth, political power, educational opportunity, and style of life" (44). Thus, the static nature of British class system restrained a generation of educated working-class students to put their knowledge to good use sowing the seeds of the Angry Young Men Movement.

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#### **4.4.2 Angry Young Men Movement**

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The "Angry Young Men" were a group of British novelists and playwrights who emerged in the 1950s and showed their discontent and contempt with the existing sociopolitical order of their nation. What they saw as the hypocrisy and mediocrity of the upper and middle classes greatly inflamed their resentment and impatience. According to Crowther, an angry young man is a "young person who strongly criticizes political and social institutions. The phrase was originally used by British newspapers

in the late 1950s, after the success of the play *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne, to describe young British writers like Osborne, Kingsley Amis, Kenneth Tynan, among others. Tadeusz Zuczkowski in his article goes on further to clarify the source of the expression. The title is taken from Leslie Allen Paul's *Angry Young Man* (1951), an autobiography of a contemporary religious philosopher converted from Marxism to Christianity, managing with angry youth in politics, left-wingism and unemployment during the 1930s (Zuczkowski). He further adds that after the premiere of *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, the term began to be more regularly utilized in connection to a group of young writers and the heroes of their novels. The figure of angry young men, rebellious with a critical attitude, who rebelled against the old forms of social organisation and the artificiality of postwar life became the characteristic embodiment of post war British men. While the battle against class distinction became one of the key factors for their anger. Another considerable factor is that the "angries" were of "working class origin and welfare-state opportunity" (Zuczkowski). They were outrightly dismissive of the elitist Oxford and Cambridge universities, the longstanding network of aristocratic families, and the British class system. Their works regularly conveyed raw rage and frustration as the postwar reforms fell short of lofty expectations for meaningful change, and they displayed an equally unrestrained disdain for the dullness of the postwar welfare state. It is to be noted that "the Movement" which emerged in the early 1950s were a number of young poets—Kingsley Amis—made explicit their perception against "modernism, internationalism, neo-Romanticism, and the upper-class bohemia" (Marwick 26) was closely interrelated to the Angry Young Men Movement. Leading members of the Movement in English writings during the 1950s were poets and novelists Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, Philip Larkin, John Wain, and Robert Conquest. This movement was driven by rage and discontent. It was perceived as a patriotic reaction against the era's ever-present elites and a rejection of the increasing modernity, particularly in literature. The trend that was seen in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953) was crystallised in 1956 in the play *Look Back in Anger*, which afterwards served as the movement's representative work. The Angry Young Men had already

established themselves as the dominating literary force of the decade by the time Sir Laurence Olivier took the title role in Osborne’s second play, *The Entertainer* (1957). Typically, the protagonist of their plays and novels is a rootless, working class or lower middle-class man who has a sardonic sense of humour, views society with disdain, and occasionally clashes with authorities but is nonetheless fascinated with the idea of moving up the social ladder. The displeasure of the lower class with current sociopolitical system, which inequitably valued the upper class and the middle classes vehemently attacked their hypocrisy, is a prominent concern in the works of the Angry Young Men Movement. The portrayal of youth’s abject position in society is another topic that is frequently discussed in this age. The authors often depicted the protagonists as disillusioned with life, dissatisfied with their profession, and unfit for a society that deprives him of basic rights. The character uses excessive rage and caustic humour to communicate his displeasure with societal concerns. He frequently indulges in infidelity and alcoholism as a means of escaping the difficulties of life. Overall, he represents the most dissatisfied generation of post war Britain. Though there was not an organized group of writers but authors like John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine, William Cooper, to mention a few were often associated with the notion of ‘Angry Young Men.’ Apart from Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* and Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, a few notable works that echoes the class trap and political disillusionment confronted by the lower class youth are John Braine’s *Room at The Top*, David Storey’s *This Sporting Life*, Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, etc.

*Space for Learner*

**Check Your Progress**

Write a note on the emergence of the “angry Young Men Movement in the 1950s as an aftermath of the postwar social milieu of Britain?

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### **4.4.3 Post war British Theatre**

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The 1950s was an interesting period for British theatre. One of the main avenues for both entertainment and the expression of anguish in post-war England was the English theatre. The 1950s and 1960s are known for a revival of the dramatic interest brought on by the British Theatre's renewal, the permissive society and the emergence of several movements, particularly those that address the clash of the sexes. Two such movements were the Angry Young Men Movement and the Feminist Movement, both of which reacted against the lack of opportunities and had a significant impact on George Bernard Shaw's problem plays and John Galsworthy's realism. One of the rather fascinating aspects of the topic is the fact that there was a shift from the theatre of writers like Arnold Wesker and John Whiting and all the decorative drawing room plays where no lower-class persons really appeared on the English stage. But the emergence of "kitchen sink drama" propelled by the movement exposed political and social issues while taking the working class and lower class into account.

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### **4.4.4 Kitchen Sink Drama**

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One of the most important movements in contemporary British theatre evolved between the 1950s and 1970s as a response to absurdist and avant-garde theatre, and it became well-known during this time. The title "the kitchen sink drama" typically refers to plays that represent a new trend of British realism that purposefully captures a genuine portrayal of the working class throughout the years of wealth. The peculiar characteristic of kitchen sink drama was the context of conveying the social message, the breakthrough in society and on-stage. What they witnessed and experienced as social change and mobility, may in fact be perceived as the factual and reliable path our society is taking in the direction of the future. They sympathized with members of the working class, especially the impoverished, and focused on the unpleasant aspects of modern existence through representations that place a strong emphasis on the connection between place and identity. The gritty everyday realities that contemporary Britons had to deal with at the time were represented. Writing or movies frequently dealt with issues such as



homelessness, poverty, alcoholism, pregnancy and abortion, etc. When referring to kitchen sink realism, the phrase “angry young men” is often used. It pertains to British authors from the working and middle classes who wrote in the 1950s.

The majority of British theatre until *Look Back in Anger* favoured stagings of classical plays or Victorian comedies. In general, the Victorian dramas succeeded for the most part with conventional subjects from the top governing class of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the otherhand, Osborne’s play described the raw feelings and quotidian life of the working class. Due to its concentration on the home and emotional lives of common people, this form of theatre was named “kitchen sink”. In *Look Back in Anger*, the kitchen literally makes up a portion of the set. The British Empire’s rise and fall provides the cultural context of the play. Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) was one of the angst-filled performances that resulted from the disillusionment following the government’s failure to keep its promises after the Second World War, it was also a time when theatrical idiom underwent transition. According to John Heilpern, Osborne’s play is fundamentally about the “class war, marital war and sex war.” And Jimmy Porter became the prototype of an entire generation of “angry young men” who were enraged by the contemporary social milieu. A post war generation was audibly dissatisfied with the effects of the war and remained yearning for its past glory. He idealises the noble causes of the past, while he mocks those who cannot comprehend the reason for the shift in circumstances, it can be seen as a moment of change as well as response. The play ended up being the drama that shook a sleepy popular culture to its core: a drama notable for its domestic realism.

**Stop to Consider**

Apart from “kitchen sink drama” that marked a shift from the “well-made plays” and drawing room comedies of the previous generation with the entry of plays like *Look Back in Anger* on stage, Theatre of the Absurd also ushered a new wave on the theatrical scene of Europe in the 1950s. The plays were concerned with the meaninglessness of human existence, logical construction and

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rationalism were replaced by irrationality and devaluation of language to communicate human condition. Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, were some of the prominent absurdist playwrights. In Britain, Harold Pinter's works are allied to the Theatre of the Absurd.

**Check Your Progress**

Discuss the impact of World War II on postwar British society with reference to the emergence of a new wave in the British theatre of the 1950s? (80 words)

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**4.5 Stage Productions of the play**

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*Look Back in Anger* premiered on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1956, the English Stage Company's third show of its inaugural season at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square, London. Tony Richardson oversaw the direction of the play. Jimmy Porter, played by Kenneth Haigh, was joined by Mary Ure as Jimmy's wife Alison, it starred Alan Bates as Cliff, Helena Charles as Helena and John Welsh as the Colonel. The set was designed by Alan Tagg, and the music for songs by Tom Eastwood. The English Stage Company was established in 1955, in order to support the staging of new plays by contemporary authors that would not find production in the commercial West End Theatre (London's equivalent of Broadway in New York). West End theatre offered excellent performances and good production values, but very little drama relevant to the quotidian reality of contemporary England. The majority of the plays at the time were often harmless light comedies, thrillers, and imports; for instance, there were 14 American plays in 1955 alone. Osborne had sent copies of *Look Back in Anger* to each and every London agent as well as numerous West End producers, but they had all rejected him. And when the script came to the Royal Court, the artistic director George Devine and his young assistant Tony Richardson knew it was exactly what they were looking for. According to Devine, *Look Back in Anger* was thought to be a production that would "blow a hole in the old theatre" (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Under the direction of Tony Richardson and producer David Merrick, the play was transferred to Broadway the following year. The play retained the original cast except for the role of Helena which was performed by Vivienne Drummond. The play succeeded in garnering three Tony Award nominations, including the ‘best play’ and ‘best dramatic actress’ for Mary Ure. Judi Dench was the director of the August 1989 production of the Renaissance Theatre Company at the Lyric Theatre in London, which also starred Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson. In the year 1995, Michael Sheen played Jimmy Porter, Claire Skinner played Alison, Dominic Rowan played Cliff, Hermione Norris played Helena in a production directed by Greg Hersov at the Royal Exchange in Manchester. At the Royal National Theatre in London, Hersov directed a second play in 1999 with Michael Sheen as the lead. A notable 21<sup>st</sup> century stage production at White Bear Theatre of *Look Back in Anger* is by Big Boots Theatre Company starring James Fawcett as Jimmy, Aaron Bennett as Cliff and Rowan Douglas as Alison and Holly Hinton as Helena under the direction of Sebastian Palka. However, Sebastian Palka’s reinterpretation of the play from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective “steers away from the theme of anger, offering perseverance, striving and non-conformism instead” (Joanna Herington). In fact, James Fawcett’s Jimmy leans more towards the menacing coldness of a psychopath than the angry vehemence typically associated with Porter’s outrages.

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## **4.6 Adaptations of the play**

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### **Film Adaptation**

Richard Burton, Claire Bloom, and Mary Ure starred in Tony Richardson’s 1959 British remake, which was shot in 1958. John Osborne, who wrote the play, collaborated with Nigel Kneale to write the script. Loudon Sainthill was in charge of interior set design. The movie was nominated for four 1959 BAFTA Awards, including Best Actor for Richard Burton, but it didn’t take home any of the awards. Even at the US box office, the movie did not perform well. Another version was released in 1980 directed by David Hugh Jones and Lindsay Anderson.

### **Radio Adaptation**

On 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2016, the BBC aired a radio dramatization with David Tennant playing Jimmy Porter and Ian McKellen playing the Colonel, under the direction of Richard Wilson

## 4.7 Biography of the Author

John Osborne, full name John James Osborne, regarded as “the man who turned anger into art,” was an English playwright, critic, screenwriter and actor. He was born on December 12, 1929, in Fulham, South West London. He is renowned for his scathing rhetoric and strident criticism of “established” social and political standards. When his father, commercial copywriter Thomas Godfrey Osborne, passed away in 1941, leaving Osborne with an insurance payment that he used to pay for his college education at Devon’s Belmont College. Osborne was heartbroken by his father’s untimely demise, and he spent the rest of his life weeping over his death. He hated college at Devon and returned to his mother in London and briefly tried trade journalism until a job of instructing a travelling troupe of young actors introduced him to the world of theatre. His acting career quickly took off, and he later worked as an actor-manager for several repertory companies in small towns while also attempting playwriting. Actress Stella Linden, a friend and mentor of Osborne’s, who was also one of his earliest loves, helped him write his first play, *The Devil Inside Him*, in 1950. In 1956, the same year that English Stage Company performed *Look Back in Anger*, Osborne made his debut as London actor. Although the play’s format was not novel, its subject matter was. The 20-30 year olds from Great Britain who did not participate in World War II and thought its aftermath was shoddy and unpromising took the stage for the first time.

Osborne’s dramatic career took a swift turn with the production of his seminal play *Look Back in Anger*, which many critics have called the pinnacle of postwar British theatre. *The Entertainer* (1957), Osborne’s next play, depicts a modern Britain that has lost some of its former self-assurance. Osborne utilises the decline of the music-hall tradition as a trope for the downfall of a nation’s vigour, as such its protagonist is a failing comedian. In 1958, Osborne and director Tony Richardson established Woodfall Film Productions, and the company went on to produce the films *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *The Entertainer* (1959), and *Tom Jones* (1963), which was adapted from a Henry Fielding novel and was based on a screenplay by Osborne that received an Academy Award.

Osborne’s epic drama *Luther* (1961), which is about the leader of the Reformation, demonstrated his talent for developing a sympathetically rebellious lead character. His two plays for England namely *The Blood of*

*the Bambergs*, a parody on monarchy, and *Under the Plain Cover*, a look at an incestuous couple engaging in a game of dominance and submission, are produced in 1962. In Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964), a dissatisfied lawyer picks up Jimmy Porter's rant in a new key. Based on Alfred Redl's narrative, *A Patriot for Me* (1965) portrays a homosexual Austrian officer in the years leading up to World War I and demonstrates Osborne's concerns in the decline of empire and the dangers nonconformist. In *West of Suez* (1971), which makes his ideological rivals seem bewildered and neurotic, there is some sympathy for a type of British coloniser whose time has passed. Jimmy Porter is revisited in Osborne's final play, *Déjà vu* (1992), a sequel to *Look Back in Anger*, after a 35-year interval.

Osborne in the first installment of his autobiography *A Better Class of Person* (1981), confesses that *Look Back in Anger's* fire was largely inspired by Osborne's own early experiences. In it, he criticizes his violent temperament and the mediocrity of lower-middle class English society as symbolized by his mother, whom he detested. The second installment of his autobiography, titled *Almost a Gentleman*, was published in 1991.

At the age of 62, Osborne passed away in Shropshire, England, on December 24, 1994, as a result of complications from diabetes. Along with numerous autobiographical pieces, he also left behind a sizable body of theatre works. In the hospital, his final words were written on a cigarette packet: "I have sinned."

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## 4.8 Summing Up

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*Look Back in Anger* is an important play of its kind known as "kitchen sink drama" that transformed the stagnancy of postwar British theatre in the 1950s. The play is a scathing criticism on the class divide and limitations of 1950s England, a scream of despair and frustration. The above sections have tried to provide a vivid understanding of the social and cultural context of the play, its various stage productions and adaptations, and an author's biography. The following Unit will provide a comprehensive understanding of the play by giving a detailed summary of the play.

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## **4.9 References and Suggested Readings**

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## Unit 5 : John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger* (Reading the Play)

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*Space for Learner*

### Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Act-wise Summary and Analysis
- 5.4 Major Characters
- 5.5 Major Themes
- 5.6 Summing Up
- 5.7 References and Suggested Readings

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### 5.1 Objectives

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The primary objective of this Unit is to acquaint the readers with one of the most important plays of the 1950s British theatre.

- *look* at the basic plot of the play
- *evaluate* the action of the play
- *learn* about the major characters of the play
- *identify* the basic issues and themes represented in the play

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### 5.2 Introduction

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*Look Back in Anger* explores the marital relationship between Jimmy Porter and Alison. A core factor revolving their marriage is class. Alison belongs from an upper middle class military family, while Jimmy comes from a working-class background though he is well-educated. The play is set in the Midlands, in the Porter's claustrophobic one-room flat. The couple share their flat with Cliff Lewis, an amiable Welsh working class man and Jimmy's old friend. Both of them co-owns a candy stall where they work as street vendor. Other important characters include Helena and Colonel Redfern. The play opens on a Sunday morning with Alison pressing clothes on an ironing board while Jimmy and Cliff reading newspaper and the former ranting out on the social and political climate of the country. Alison

gets burned when Jimmy pushes her while she is using the ironing board. On her visit to the doctor, it is revealed that she is pregnant with Jimmy's child. She confides the news with Cliff and expresses her concerns about Jimmy's reaction on the revelation of the news. Jimmy's nanny Mrs. Tanner whom he adores and refers to as 'Mom,' visits him but gets a cold-shoulder from Alison. This angers Jimmy and he taunts her when she attempts to share her pregnancy news. And when she informs him that her friend Helena Charles will come to stay at her place, his rage intensifies and he curses her that he hopes she gets pregnant and loses her child. Helena convinces Alison to leave Jimmy and return to her father. She becomes successful as Alison leaves with her father, Colonel Redfern, as she can no longer bear with Jimmy's indifference and disdain towards her. Jimmy's anger aggravates to the extent that he doesn't get affected when Helena informs him about Alison's pregnancy. While, Helena stays back with Jimmy and starts an affair with him, Cliff on the other hand, feels isolated and starts missing Alison's presence. Cliff then decides to leave Jimmy's flat and the candy business. At the train station after he sees off Cliff, he and Helena enter a train station pub where they encounter Alison sitting alone. Jimmy leaves immediately, while Helena stays back only to hear that Alison has lost her child. After hearing the news, Helena feels guilty and remorseful and informs Jimmy about her decision to depart from their lives. Alison is waiting to depart for home when Jimmy arrives at the station. Alison informs him that they will never be able to have children and both of them reconcile in the end.

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### **5.3 Act-wise Summary and Analysis**

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The play is divided into three acts.

#### **(I) Act 1**

The play opens in a one-room flat in Midlands, England, shared by Jimmy Porter, a young working-class man, and his wife, Alison. The room is filled with a sense of disarray and frustration. Jimmy is seen playing the trumpet and expressing his anger and dissatisfaction with the world through furious rants about societal injustices, political hypocrisy, and the stagnant state of their lives. For instance, he says: "It's always depressing, always the same. We never seem to get any further, do we? Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking, ironing. A few more hours, and another week gone. Our youth is slipping away" (1.1.8)



Alison enters, carrying an ironing board. She appears detached and distant, lost in her own thoughts. Jimmy immediately starts belittling her, mocking her upper middle-class background and criticising her for not understanding the struggles of the working class. He expresses his discontent and resentment towards their stagnant lives, feeling trapped and limited by their social status. He says to her that the word “Pusillanimous” best describes her. Cliff and Jimmy wrestles then, and Cliff falls over Alison. She then reveals him that she is pregnant.

### **Analysis**

One of the key scenes in Act 1 is the heated argument between Jimmy and Alison. The argument escalates quickly as Jimmy relentlessly criticizes Alison, mocking her upbringing and accusing her of being emotionally distant. Alison, feeling cornered and hurt, defends herself but struggles to find her voice. Jimmy delivers a powerful monologue, known as the “Ladybird” speech, expressing his anger and disillusionment with society. He lashes out at Alison, Helena, and the social structures that he believes have held him back. This scene highlights the intense emotional conflicts and class divisions that define the play.

## **(II) Act 2**

### **Scene I**

Two weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon, Act 2 opens. Helena listens as Alison describes her marriage with Jimmy. Later, Helena enters with two prayer books and informs Jimmy about a call. Jimmy solemnly enters and informs Cliff that Hugh’s mother Mrs Tanner is critical and he must visit her before she passes away. Jimmy request Alison to join him but she refuses, and accompanies Helena to church. Jimmy is stunned by Alison’s indifference and throws a teddy bear across the room while leaning his head against some drawers, and finally buries himself on the bed.

### **Scene II**

The following evening, Act II Scene II begins. Alison’s father, Colonel Redfern is seated. The colonel is informed by Alison that Jimmy referred to her mother as an “overprivileged old bitch” and described the Colonel as a “plant left over from the Edwardian wilderness (2.2.68-69). Alison decides to leave Jimmy, and Cliff asks her if she has informed him. She hands a letter to Cliff and departs. When everyone has left, Jimmy asks Helena to leave as well but she slaps him and both share a passionate kiss.

### **Analysis**

A notable scene in Act 2 is Jimmy's explosive outburst, directed at Alison, Helena, and society at large. In a fit of rage, he unleashes his frustrations, expressing his deep-seated anger and resentment. He criticises Alison and Helena, blaming them for their roles in his unhappiness. This scene showcases Jimmy's deeply rooted anger and his sense of alienation from the world around him. Alison's comment that Jimmy and Colonel are like-minded in many ways sums up the scene. The present transition is what preoccupies the mind of the Colonel, Jimmy on the other hand, is frustrated because he believes that the past breeds resentment and stagnation, and he does not see any hope for the future for anyone. According to Osborne, the past has clear repercussion for the present and both Jimmy and the Colonel experiences this dilemma.

### **(III) Act 3**

#### **Scene I**

The scene begins once more with a domestic portrayal of Jimmy and Cliff reading the Sunday newspaper. And Helena, who has replaced Alison is seen occupied ironing in a corner similar to how Alison did in Act I. Then Cliff informs Jimmy that he is considering quitting his partnership of the candy stall. Jimmy and Helena shares a sweet moment while embracing each other. There is a knock at the door. When Jimmy opens it, standing in a raincoat and looking ill. Jimmy tells Helena that she has a visitor and exits the room, leaving the two women alone.

#### **Scene II**

Jimmy can be seen playing his trumpet in Cliff's room when the curtain opens. Alison's cup of tea is being poured by Helena. Helena acknowledges that she still believes in right and wrong, and confesses that Alison has "more right" to be with Jimmy. She says that it is now over between her and Jimmy. She informs Jimmy about her decision and leaves. Alison is about to leave when Jimmy confronts her. She tells him that she has gone through a similar pain and wished if he could have seen her as "so stupid, and ugly and ridiculous" (3.2.102). Both of the reconciles their differences and the play ends with both playing their bear and squirrel game.

## **Analysis**

The final act takes place several months later, and the room has become more dilapidated and worn. The relationships among the characters have deteriorated significantly. Alison and Jimmy's marriage is characterised by emotional distance and indifference. Their love has faded, replaced by a sense of resignation and detachment.

Jimmy contemplates leaving Alison, feeling trapped and suffocated by their relationship. He oscillates between a desire for freedom and a sense of duty towards Alison. Ultimately, he decides to stay, realizing that he cannot escape his anger and frustrations no matter where he goes. He acknowledges the complexities of their love and the overwhelming presence of his anger within him. Towards the end, he expresses a glimmer of hope for change and redemption. He reflects on the necessity of anger as a driving force for progress and self-discovery. Jimmy acknowledges the challenges and disappointments of life but finds solace in the potential for transformation. This poignant ending encapsulates the themes of the play, including the search for meaning, the struggle against societal constraints, and the human capacity for resilience.

Throughout *Look Back in Anger*, the confined space of the one-room flat serves as a metaphorical prison, intensifying the emotional pressure and highlighting the claustrophobic nature of the characters' lives. The play's dialogue-driven scenes and passionate monologues bring forth the characters' inner turmoil, societal critiques, and deep-seated frustrations, making it a significant work in British drama.

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## **5.4 Major Characters**

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### **Jimmy Porter**

Jimmy is portrayed by Osborne as a prototype of the term "angry young man," who is frequently heard ranting against the British upper classes' arrogance, and vents it out on his wife Alison and later Helena. Born into a working-class family but with high level of education, like his friend and flatmate Cliff Lewis, he has a conflicted connection with his status as an educated person. He is a tall, thin young man of twenty five. He is shown as a frustrated youth who cannot bring any change despite his high education because of his class status. He is a strange amalgamation of "sincerity and cheerful malice, of sensitivity and freebooting cruelty" (1.1).

Jimmy's rage against society, conflict between classes and sexes, and even his disdain of religion permeates throughout the play. For instance, his dislike for "establishment" like church is witnessed when Alison expresses her intention to accompany Helena to church, he immediately retorts her saying if she is mentally ill. He is perpetually complaining about the injustice, corruption, and irregularities in society. He claims that "no beliefs, no convictions, and no enthusiasm" exist. This grievance of his throughout the play resembles the characteristics of an "angry young man." Despite his university education, he has to work in a candy store. He is enraged by his helplessness since he believes that society is dictating his ideals and aspirations for his life and only this trauma has made him disdainful. His existence and identity were the key unanswered concerns that he was dealing with. He yearns for the company of anyone with whom he can discuss his thoughts and sentiments about society and religion, which have left him disillusioned, disappointed, and nihilistic. He hates Alison, her family, and even Helena because of their social class and privilege. Jimmy dominates the play with his anger, convictions and profane use of language. The character of Jimmy Porter is perhaps hyperbolic and a personified representation of Osborne's conscience. He is masochist and ruthless; he views love as a conquest and marriage as a form of retaliation creating a love-hate relationship with his wife. He also shows traits of toxic masculinity. His childhood trauma, particularly his father's death and mother's inadequacy also acts as the root of his psychological complexity, anger, and attitude.

### **Alison**

Alison is a "tall, slim, dark" woman of same age as Jimmy. She has a reserved demeanour and riveting eyes that makes her elusive to people. She belongs to the upper middle class strata of the English society and her social privilege becomes the bone of contention between her and Jimmy. She embodies the oppressive English society of the 1950s: Church, money, education. Jimmy and she have been married for three years. Alison's lack of emotional commitment leads Jimmy to attack her. Although she doesn't express any sexual interest in Cliff, she shares an amiable bond with him and prefers to confide with him about her concerns. Even though she married Jimmy, she is not devoted to him. He acts brutally towards her and expects a genuine response from her but fails to do so every time, until the end of the play when they both confront each other honestly. She claims that because she hasn't experienced genuine suffering and degradation, she

is not real. She at times behave indifferently and feels trapped between her upper class upbringing and her husband's working class environment. She doesn't object when Helena steps in and make plans for her to leave. Instead, she returns to her parents with hopes to find some stability and morals, only to return to Jimmy in the end. She subsequently makes up with him when she miscarries and lose her child. Towards the end, we see that she becomes more fully committed to the deep emotion present in Jimmy's world.

### **Cliff**

Cliff Lewis is a "short, dark, big-boned" man of Jimmy's age. He is Jimmy's old friend and partner, with whom he shares a candy shop and a flat. He is a Welsh-born man from the working-class with humble education. He is a pleasant person, loving and funny. Although he is empathetic to Alison, he adjusts once she leaves. Cliff is an easy-going and kind-hearted man who serves as a mediator between Jimmy and Alison. He tries to maintain a sense of peace and harmony within the flat, offering a contrast to Jimmy's constant anger. Cliff quickly establishes a close bond with Alison, which further complicates the relationships within the flat. Though he misses Alison, his first allegiance is towards Jimmy. Nevertheless, in the end of the play he decides to forge his own path and ends his partnership of the candy stall with Jimmy.

### **Helena**

Helena Charles is Alison's friend, who belong to the upper class society just like Alison. She is an actress by profession and comes to stay Porters while she performs in a play at the local theatre. She is a medium-height attractive woman, whose "sense of matriarchal authority makes most men anxious, not only to please but impress" (2.1.37). Helena appears to be quite worried about Alison and phones Alison's father requesting him to take her back. Ironically, when Alison leaves, she starts an affair with Jimmy. However, when she meets Alison again she feels guilty of breaking their marital relationship and decides to leave because she considers Alison holds a more rightful place in Jimmy's life than her. Helena's presence intensifies the conflicts and exposes the class divisions and personal insecurities among the characters. She is portrayed as a strong character who has the ability to counter Jimmy's verbal abuse. She believes he is "still in the middle of French Revolution" (3.2.96).

### Colonel Redfern

Colonel Redfern is Alison’s father. He embodies the fall and nostalgia for the British Empire. He has been stationed in India for many years as a representation of Britain’s imperial reach into the world. He claims that Americans are unable to comprehend why their country is no longer the most powerful country in the world since the world has changed to an American age. Colonel Redfern is pressed for time. He no longer lives in the England he has left as a young army officer. When Jimmy describes him as “just one of those sturdy old plants left over from the Edwardian wilderness that can’t understand why the sun isn’t shining anymore,” he is giving a realistic assessment of him (2.2.69).

#### Check Your Progress

1. Describe the character of Jimmy Porter? Why was he angry? (100 words)

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2. Sketch the character of Alison. (100 words)

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### 5.5 Major Themes

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#### **Class conflict, anger and identity crisis:**

The grievance, despair, and rage of the working class are portrayed in *Look Back in Anger* while also highlighting the struggle between the upper and lower classes. In the years following World War II, social standards significantly changed in England. Although the working class had access to educational opportunities, they were not valued and their opinions were ignored. As a result, Jimmy Porter in Osborne’s play emphasizes this issue, which peaked in English society following World War II. Like this persona, ‘the lost generation’ developed in England during the post-war era, its members living in a vacuum and referred to as “angry young men,” who were upset by the degradation and bias. Despite their education, it

became impossible for them to become respectable people and hold coveted positions in society without it. In this regard, Jimmy exemplifies those who were degraded as a result of class discrimination in England since he is bound by his working-class upbringing and is unable to adapt to bourgeoisie principles. For this reason, “when Jimmy looks back in anger, he is generationally situated as a voice of contemporary youth[...]. He is certainly prepared to denounce his own generation for getting too used too readily to a diminished role in the world [...]” (Quigley 40-42). As such, Jimmy embodies the resentment and psychological issues of young working-class people in postwar era. In the play, Jimmy describes his misery as a result of his lack of purpose for living. He probably can’t feel at home as a working-class man who manages to fit into the upper class, so he criticizes the upper middle class for their indifference to the plight of the lower class. His anger can also be seen in his appearance, as Alison’s friend Helena remarks: “I’ve never seen such hatred in someone’s eyes before. It’s slightly horrifying” (2.1.39). Jimmy feels displaced because he is neither able to fit into the upper middle-class family of his wife Alison nor can adopt to working-class values after his education, this induces an identity crisis in Jimmy. It is noteworthy, that he complains about the exchange of letters between Alison and his mother where Alison never mentions about him. This triggers his anger as he feels that she looks down at him for his social background and this makes him more abusive towards Alison. His bitterness intensifies to the extent that he doesn’t even care about Alison’s pregnancy, rather curses her to suffer pain. In this regard, many English people, like Jimmy, appeared in the postwar England. According to Kroll, “these people were “displaced persons in English society, belonging to no one, yet wanting to” have an acceptable identity compatible with their self-realisation (556). As such due to his identity crisis, he suffers from a sense of alienation in his own society.

### **Gender and Attitude towards women**

Jimmy’s anger towards society also comes in conjunction with his hatred towards women. Throughout the play, he has been contemptuous towards women in general as well as all the women he is associated with. In one of his conversations with Cliff, we witness his prejudice and misogynist attitude towards women when he says: “Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death” (3.1.89). He further states that men have no their brave cause left to do except “to be butchered by women”

(1.20). He directs his anger towards Alison, and through “his tirades he attacks not only her family and the establishment; he attacks all women of the world” (Mukhopadhyay 117). He keeps nagging and taunting Alison for her clumsiness and is insensitive towards her. However, we also witness his softer side for women when he expresses his love and concern for Mrs. Tanner, a working-class woman, whom he has given the stature of his mother; and Madeline, his ex-lover. This pontificates that his anger is directed only towards the upper-class society and upper-class women, except his mother whom he despises. The gender dynamics in the play is also reinforced through the female characters, particularly Helena and Alison’s reaction and response to Jimmy. Helena is tenacious and strongly expresses her resentment towards Jimmy’s anti-women perception. She does not succumb to Jimmy’s verbal or physical abuses and threatens to slap him back if he acts violently to her. Even Alison has her own way of exercising her agency. She not only showcased that by defying her social status and marrying Jimmy, but also in defying his orders on several incidents in the play like going to the church or not visiting Mrs. Tanner. In fact, she leaves Jimmy on her own terms exhibiting her ability to make her own choices. It should also be taken into account that John Osborne himself says that Jimmy is not anti-feminist and defended the accusations of misogyny and sexism in the play in *Déjà vu* (the sequel to *Look Back in Anger*):

The original character of JP was widely misunderstood because of the emphasis on the element of anger.... Wearisome theories about JP’s sadism, anti-feminism, even closet homosexuality are still peddled to gullible students by dubious and partisan ‘academics’ (Osborne vii).

Despite, his defense, the overtones of sexism and misogyny in the play written at a time when Women’s movement was gaining momentum couldn’t be overlooked.

### **Fall of British Empire and nostalgia**

The play’s sociopolitical and historical context is the postwar Britain in the 1950s, a decade which also marks the decline of the British empire and its nostalgic past glory. Post World War II, Britain has lost its hold on the colonies as well as encountered the Suez crisis which further sealed its waning power across the globe. The effect of the fall of empire pervaded the British society as a whole. While the upper classes reminiscence about the colonial past, the lower classes despite higher education expressed their



anger on nation's lack of social and economic revolution. The play represents the conflict between the past and the present—the past glory of British empire embodied by Colonel Redfern and its aftermath full of disillusionment and stagnancy represented by Jimmy—that engendered the anger motif in the play. Colonel Redfern, a member of the class that is supposed to be Jimmy Porter's "natural" enemy, is filled with nostalgia as he remembers about his Edwardian past during the time of British colonial authority in India. After countless rounds of indiscriminately attacking Alison, his wife and the Colonel's daughter, in an effort to shake her out of her upper-class complacency, Jimmy Porter, the working-class protagonist and anti-establishment hero who is remembered by commentators as representative of a postwar generation in his anger and dissatisfaction. He sighs as he expresses concerns for the Colonel and laments and demise of the imperial ideal. The Colonel and Jimmy's perspectives reveal new details about Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, which is considered a landmark play that ushered in a new wave in British theatre of the 1950s.

**Check Your Progress**

Consider the title "Look Back in Anger". What does it mean?  
(150 words)

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What elements of British society does Jimmy find so objectionable and why? (150 words)

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**5.6 Summing Up**

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The play *Look Back in Anger* highlights a sense of disappointment with the lack of social revolution in postwar British society. The play also presents the issue of a generational conflict—the older generation represented by Colonel Redfern and the younger generation by Jimmy and Alison. In the act-wise reading of the play we have provided an analysis

of the play. Moreover, the Unit has tried to discuss some of the major themes of the play to provide the students with a more in-depth understanding of the play. The supplementary unit that follows this unit will further add to a more inclusive understanding of the play.

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### 5.7 References and Suggested Readings

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## Unit 6 : John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger*

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Space for Learner

### (Supplementary Unit)

#### Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Symbols in *Look Back in Anger*
- 6.3 Language in *Look Back in Anger*
- 6.4 Key Literary Terms
- 6.5 Critical Approaches to *Look Back in Anger*
- 6.6 Summing Up
- 6.7 References and Suggested Readings

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### 6.1 Objectives

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Rightly called a revolutionary and controversial play in British theatre history, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* reflects the zeitgeist of the post-war youth. However, it was revolutionary "neither in its form nor in its politics", but as mentioned in Andrew Sanders' *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, it was by the standard of time "alarming in its rancour, its language, and its setting" (Sanders 595). The first reactions of the play were mostly negative and mixed. Critics were mostly against the portrayal of Jimmy Porter. The Daily Mail called him "basically a bore" (cited in Tynan's review of *Look Back in Anger*). However, two major critics at that time, Harold Hobson from *the Sunday Times* and Kenneth Tynan from *The Observer* noted its significance. Reviewing *Look Back in Anger* as "The Voice of the Young" for *The Observer*, Tynan's positive reactions are archived with the words: "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade" (cited in Tynan's review of *Look Back in Anger*). Along with the audiences' reactions, its iconoclastic social message, and its explorations of sadomasochistic relationships, *Look Back in Anger* is seen as the testament of a new generation. The critical and theoretical receptions of the play have also invited the reader to interpret it from various perspectives. The alienation of the first generation of Post-War British society, its contribution to the image of "angry young man", the language and dialects

of upper class and working class people, and the symbols used in the text to add depth in the story are some crucial aspects that demanded critical discussions.

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- *discuss* the play from various critical perspectives
- *understand* the use of symbols
- *look* at the use of language
- *learn* key dramatic terms

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## 6.2 Symbols in *Look Back in Anger*

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A playwright uses symbols to signify ideas and characters' psychological development. He gives figurative meanings to the symbols that are different from their literal definitions. In *Look Back in Anger*, Osborne also employs symbols to add depth and meaning to the story. The frustration of the post-war youth, the gap in the lifestyles of upper and working class people, and the major characters' hopes and impediments in the social contexts are represented through these symbols. Following are some of the symbols used by Osborne to reveal various issues involved in the play:

- i) **Trumpet:** Act two, scene one of *Look Back in Anger* opens with Jimmy who is playing his jazz trumpet. In act three, scene two, Jimmy is playing it again in Cliff's room. At various points in the play, the sound of Jimmy's trumpet can also be heard which allows Jimmy's presence to dominate the stage even if he is off stage. Jazz has been traditionally looked at as a music of protest and struggle. Jimmy's music, therefore, is a symbol of his suffering and through the trumpet, Jimmy expresses his frustration and anguish. Jimmy declares, at one point, that anyone who does not like jazz hasn't any feelings for people either. His trumpet symbolizes his association with the working class. It allows him to be a voice of resistance. Jimmy finds his trumpet as a medium through which he can assert his presence non-verbally. Playing the trumpet, Jimmy is often seen disrupting the domestic scene. Rather than calling it a movement to gain attention, Jimmy's trumpet serves largely to antagonize the characters around him. Other characters like Helena, Cliff and Alison hate the noise made by Jimmy. By drawing attention to

the differences between Jimmy and other inmates of his flat, the trumpet reinforces the tension of the play.

- ii) **Newspapers:** When the curtain rises, we see Jimmy and Cliff are reading newspapers. Throughout act one, and act three, both read newspapers and it becomes a major visual feature in the house. Jimmy's room is filled with old furniture, old clothes and half-read newspapers. The newspapers symbolize Jimmy's education and a way to mimic the habits of the upper class elite. Jimmy comments from his newspaper readings and uses articles and vocabulary to belittle the intelligence of Alison and Cliff. However, the newspapers reflect his ambivalent status with education. He finds newspapers are making him feel ignorant as it fails to depict the real concern of working class men like him. In Jimmy's apartment, the old newspapers are forming a jungle. This showcases that in a working class apartment, building an elite status becomes futile as upper class character Alison would find this chaotic and redundant.
- iii) **Church Bells:** Jimmy finds the sound of the church bells irritating. He thinks the church bells represents a respectable middle class morality which he finds oppressive. Helena and Alison both follow this version of morality whereas Jimmy reflects his protest towards this vision. He yells and curses at the noise of the church bells. It is seen that at various points in the play, the church bells rings from outside the window and it intrudes into Jimmy's apartment and his life. It serves as a reminder of the existence of the spiritual world which Jimmy doesn't like to follow. He doesn't believe in ritual practices and avoids church-going. Therefore, the sound of the church bells, being symbolic of the church, often bothers him. Contrary to Jimmy's believe, we see Alison leaves for Church in the middle of act 2. She follows Helena back into the middle class world.
- iv) **Pipe:** Jimmy uses his pipe as an upper class symbol. Instead of reflecting on his own working class status, Jimmy takes the pipe as the symbol of elite, educated, and university professors. The smell of the pipe also works as a metaphor for other characters who come to associate with Jimmy. In the first act, Alison says that she has got used to the smell which reflects her acceptance

of the values and sensibilities of that context. Helena also reflects her liking of the smell which indicates her attraction for Jimmy. In the third act, it was the smell of pipe smoke that reminds Alison of Jimmy while she was living with her parents. The pipe works for Jimmy to assert control, as its smell dominates the room.

- v) **Bear and Squirrel:** Jimmy and Alison mimic the bear and squirrel toys which they have kept upon a chest of drawers. The game gives them access to express affection for each other. The bear symbolizes Jimmy and the squirrel symbolizes Alison. It offers them a refuge from the misery of their daily married life and provides a way to communicate with one another. The toys help them to forget their societal and class conflicts and draw them closer to feel love for each other.
  
- vi) **The ironing board:** The very act of ironing of Alison in the beginning and later by Helena serves as a symbol of domesticity, societal expectations, and gender roles. It symbolizes the monotonous task that Alison is expected to perform as a wife. However, for Jimmy, it becomes a source of frustration. The same kind of routine adds to Jimmy's boredom. Jimmy complains about the same rituals which are reading newspapers, drinking tea, and ironing. Jimmy uses the ironing board as a target to vent out his frustration and attacks Alison verbally to create further tension between them.

**Check Your Progress**

Write a note on the use of symbols in *Look Back in Anger*.  
(150 words)

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**6.3 Language in *Look Back in Anger***

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The language in *Look Back in Anger* reflects the changing aspects of British post-war society. It captures the tensions of a society rebuilding

after the devastating effects of World War II. Five years after its first performance, Osborne emphasized on the importance of language in *Look Back in Anger*. In *That Awful Music*, he wrote: “Although *Look Back in Anger* was a formal, rather old-fashioned play, I think it broke out by its use of language.” Osborne follows the realistic tradition in his use of language. The speech and rhythm of the characters, especially Jimmy, reflect their education and social status. As the title of the play suggests, frustration and anger are central thematic concerns and to reflect that the characters utter strong vocabulary.

The play is filled with highly exaggerated speech with colloquial and ordinary sounds. Osborne employs various linguistic devices to create a distinctive tone for his play. Jimmy’s dialogues serve as an antithesis to the previous kind of representation of working class characters on the British stage. Previously, it was seen that lower class characters were pitied because of their class and lack of language skills. However, with Jimmy, Osborne broke this tradition. Jimmy is extremely articulate in his use of language. He is humorous and often pokes fun at other characters with his incredible use of speech. His description of Colonel Redfern as a “sturdy old plant left over from the Edwardian Wilderness” can be seen as his articulation of irony and mastery over metaphorical language. Jimmy’s frustration and anger often express with scathing monologues which are filled with biting sarcasm and bitter words. For instance, in act one, he exclaims: “Why do I spend ninepence on that damned paper every week? Nobody reads it except me. Nobody can be bothered. No one can raise themselves out of their delicious sloth. . . . Oh, brother, it’s such a long time since I was with anyone who got enthusiastic about anything (Osborne 15).

Infused with irony and satire, *Look Back in Anger* has vivid metaphors and contrasting dialects to highlight social and cultural differences. The ironical statements by its male characters who belonged to the working class critique British society’s class divisions. Jimmy uses metaphorical dialogue to describe his relationship with Alison. Jimmy uses invective, an attack through speech that abuses the object, to direct his anger against the Americans, the clergy, the evangelist, the politicians, and especially the upper and middle classes. However, the long rhetorical monologues of Jimmy do not contain any message, rather it serves the function of displaying a certain state of mind.

The monologues and dialogues uttered by the characters also serve different purposes in this play. Instead of revealing the inner thoughts, the monologues largely perform as the outburst of the characters. Although it has the self-dramatizing rhetoric of which the character is often aware, the character doesn't seem to rationalise it for himself. By contrast, the dialogues have a much more neutral effect on the characters' psyche. It serves as genuine personal communication. The language in the play serves as a powerful tool to reflect the emotions of the characters, and the social discontent; and enhances its themes of alienation, anger, and boredom.

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#### 6.4 Key Literary Terms

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**a) Angry Young Men:** A group of postwar British playwrights and novelists that emerged in the 1950s and 60s in which works reflected the disillusionment and frustrations of the society. They reacted against the prevailing norms and systems that dominated the British society at that time. The names included Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, and Alan Sillitoe whose political views were radical or anarchic. In their writings, they gave voice to the working-class experience and sought to challenge traditional values. Their works were characterized by raw and confrontational language. Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is often considered as the defining work of the movement. Jimmy Porter, the archetype of angry young man, epitomized the rage and disillusionment felt by many young men of the era.

**b) Kitchen sink drama:** The term kitchen sink is used to describe a genre of British plays that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These plays often depicted domestic settings, particularly the kitchen. Kitchen sink drama explored social and political issues, family dynamics, and the lives and struggles of working-class individuals. The plays of Osborne, Wesker, and Delaney are often termed as kitchen sink drama as they represented working class life with special emphasis on domestic reality. In their plays, they reacted against the drawing room comedies and middle class dramas of Terence Rattigan and Noel Coward. Plays, such as *Look Back in Anger* and Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley*, brought working-class stories and characters to the forefront, giving a voice to those who had been marginalized.

**c) Monologues:** In literature and drama, a monologue is considered to be an extended speech by one character. It is a speech



presented by a single character that often expresses his/her thoughts aloud. In *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy delivers lengthy monologues to reveal his anger, frustration, and discontent with society.

**d) Fourth Wall:** A term used in drama to describe an imaginary barrier between the audience and the actor on stage. It is integral to the concepts of production and story as it is intended to emphasize the world created by the playwright, producer, and director. The audience doesn't have a role in it because the action occurs within the fourth wall. The actors act imagining that the audience cannot see through this wall. It represents an invisible boundary that separates the audience of the real world from the characters of the fictional world.

Breaking the fourth wall is a technique that occurs when a character in a play acknowledges the presence of the audience. By breaking the fourth wall, the playwright accepts the artificial nature of that concept. When a character breaks the fourth wall, he/she directly communicates with the audience, or sometimes even involves the audience in the performance.

The setting of *Look Back in Anger* is a small apartment for which the "fourth wall" is noticeably very much in existence. The play follows the traditional dramatic structure. The characters also interact with each other within the confines of the stage and their fictional world. Although the actions and dialogues are primarily focused on the relationships among the characters, a director or an actor portraying Jimmy, can choose to incorporate elements of breaking the fourth wall as part of their creative decision.

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## **6.5 Critical Approaches to *Look Back in Anger***

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**a) Marxist Reading:** Marxist criticism uses the techniques and theories of Marxism and applies them in literary analysis. A marxist reading of a text focuses on the portrayal of social class, power dynamics, and the critique of capitalism. In *Look Back in Anger* the class divisions and social inequalities of Post-war Britain are highlighted through the character of Jimmy Porter. Although Jimmy is a university graduate, he works as a trader in the market. As he belongs to a working class family, he feels oppressed and marginalized by the upper class. Jimmy functions as a Marxist critic in the play and his frustration and anger against mainstream

society reflect his sense of alienation from it. Jimmy's wife Alison, who belongs to the upper class, creates tension in their relationship. Hence, Jimmy's resentment toward Alison and her family is actually representative of his anger towards the upper class. *Look Back in Anger* depicts a post-World War II Britain that largely is suffering from the trauma of war, unemployment, and high taxes. Jimmy lives a monotonous life in a claustrophobic flat and due to his low living standard, he becomes frustrated and disappointed with almost everything from religion to politics. As a working class individual, Jimmy's anger highlight the need for social change. The play features both working class and upper class characters and a Marxist reading would help to understand the class struggle between these two classes and how this conflict shapes the characters' lives.

**b) Feminist Reading:** A feminist reading of a text would emphasize how women are presented in a text and observe at the way the male characters react and address to the female characters. It involves analyzing the text through the lens of gender and power dynamics. Applying feminist theory in *Look Back in Anger* would reveal how the characters and their relationships challenge traditional gender roles and reflect societal expectations. When *Look Back in Anger* was written, the feminist movement was just emerging. However, the two female characters, Alison and Helena, represented the constrained and repressed nature of many women during that period. Alison is depicted as a submissive character whose life revolves around catering to Jimmy's needs. Her frustration and anger collided with resistance and hostility from Jimmy. Jimmy's misogynistic dialogues against Alison displayed the power dynamics of a patriarchal culture. Whereas Jimmy sees himself as a victim of the class structure which privileges Alison and her family, he fails to see the patriarchal system that privileges him over Alison. When Helena replaces Alison, she has also reflected a similar pattern of behaviour which is to provide men a well run home, cooked meals, ironed clothes, sex, and affection. The domestic atmosphere shows the responsibility of the women to maintain a comfortable environment for the men. By examining these aspects through a feminist lens, it can be seen that the women characters' roles arise mainly from the social and marital circumstances in which they are placed.

### **Stop to Consider**

Theoretical perspectives illuminate various dimensions of a text which are usually overlooked in a casual reading. It would be a good idea to attempt a reading of the play from Marxist and Feminist perspectives, as I have suggested. Whatever theoretical perspective you hold, you must do justice to the play, its representations and other theatrical dimensions.

*Space for Learner*

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## **6.6 Summing Up**

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John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* has not only created a fiasco in the British post-war theatre but also changed the landscape of British post-war culture. Jimmy Porter instantly became the poster boy of the angry young men movement. Despite the changes that occurred in the 1950s in British society, the play shakes Britain awake by representing the sense of class division and disillusionment of the young generation. This unit has discussed the use of various symbols, the language of the play, and a few important literary terms associated with the play. Moreover, it offers two critical interpretations, marxism and feminism, through which one can approach the play.

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