

## Modern English Drama

The genre of drama has greatly evolved since its inception by the Greeks. The medieval drama highlighted morality and religion. The Renaissance gave dramatists the power of individuality and secularism. The Victorian era brought optimism, orthodoxy and industry into drama. After the Victorian period, Europe was devastated with two World Wars and nuclear armaments. Treaties were no longer valid and people lost hope in life. The age of anxiety and depression began. Writers like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound fused the horrors of war into myth and legend. The bourgeoisie were broken up into small families and class hierarchies were destroyed. Social taboos were broken. Avant-garde artists and writers led the way to free-thinking and realism.

The modern era of drama began in Ireland with the foundation of the Irish Literary Theater by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge. They hoped to stage the conflicts of Ireland. In England, the dramatists wanted to alienate and shock their audience. G. B. Shaw, Somerset Maugham and John Galsworthy created new standards. These dealt with rebellion of labourers, abstract exploration of the human, colonization and the loss of identity. The conditions of factories, child labour, socialism and the rights of women were all represented. Industrialization and war led to alienation and the abstract theater. Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill and Tom Stoppard gave rise to the 'theater of exorcism' to showcase plays dealing with the horrors of the past.

The theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung produced an interest in dreams and myths as themes. This increased the boundaries of realism. Realism was yet another theme used by J. M. Synge and W. B. Yeats. Irish peasant life was the major concept but the plot was unpleasant. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). The protagonist of the play named Christy Mahon apparently wins fame for murdering his father. When the town finds out that the father is merely wounded, Christy does it a second time to win praise. But this time, everyone shuns him as a murderer.

Post world war women became emancipated and fought for rights. They challenged patriarchy and male chauvinism. Henrik Ibsen and G. B. Shaw created lead female characters in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Major Barbara* and *Pygmalion*. In Ibsen's *The Doll's House* (1879), Nora Helmer leaves her wedding ring and embarks on a self-enlightening journey. She has had enough of being a 'plaything'; a doll and nothing more. The political theater brought the harassing of natives in colonies, racial cleansing and hegemony to the stage. This theater gave way to the following movements

## 1. Absurdism

Existentialist philosopher and writer Albert Camus published his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” in 1942. It represented humankind as absurd and purposeless. Anxious humans who try to defeat fate and end up bewildered are the major characters in absurdist plays. Dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and Harold Pinter shared a pessimistic vision of humanity struggling against fate. Absurdist plays have hardly any dramatic structure. Nothing eventful happens throughout the play. In Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the two major characters are tramps. The plot is entirely constructed out of the two lost men waiting their lives for someone or something. Ultimately, this person or thing never arrives. Absurdist drama declined by the 1960s as many of the authors turned to other schools of thought.

## 2. Dadaism

The word “dada” means “yes” in Romanian and “rocking horse” in French. Writer Hugo Ball founded this school in neutral Switzerland during the First World War. The Dadaists rejected the objective approach of art as they felt that the aftermath of war was not properly depicted. They believed that life was an illusion. Human beings were thought of as essentially good though corrupted by society. Tristan Tzara initiated the Dada theater with his play *The Gas Heart* (1921).

## 3. Surrealism

Exploring the realm of dreams and memory soon became an obsession with the dada and gave way to surrealism. The term “surrealism” was coined by Guillaume Apollinaire and means “beyond realism”. The plot was vague with inhuman characters. Masks were worn and musical elements were incorporated. Liberation and exploration were the two major principles of surrealism.

## 4. Symbolism

This movement was initiated by French poet Jean Moreas in his *Symbolist Manifesto* (1886). Symbolist drama aimed to emotionally please the audience through spiritual or mythical means. For instance, Eugene O’Neill’s “hairy ape” represents the lower classes of labourers and factory workers who slave for the aristocrats. The missing cigar box in Galsworthy’s *The Silver Box* (1906) represents fate that punishes the innocent while the guilty walks free. J. M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904) is based on a woman who lost her husband and all her sons to the sea. Here, the “sea” represents fate, God and life.