

Drama in the 19th Century

Many theatres but no worthwhile plays

The 19th Century is notable for producing hardly any worthwhile drama, which is surprising since it was an extremely successful time for theatre business.

- In 1800 there were 12 buildings in London used exclusively for plays and other theatre entertainments, and 83 in the rest of the country.
- In 1900 there were 106 theatres in London and 481 in the rest of the country.

During the century, theatre became an enormously profitable business. It had even become international, with British theatre companies touring America, Europe and even as far as Australia and South Africa. A number of actors and actresses had become “stars”, earning huge sums of money for single performances, and yet there were no serious writers creating important and lasting works of dramatic and theatrical art.

To gain a reputation and become a “star” it was necessary to succeed in Shakespeare, or in highly melodramatic roles. Audiences flocked to see various actors interpreting Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Shylock and the others, and would then argue the merits of the different performances. There was also a great number of theatre adaptations of popular novels: In 1845 over the Christmas period there were twelve different stage-versions of Charles Dickens’s “The Cricket on the Hearth” in London - all of them “pirate” versions with Dickens receiving no money.

Many Gothic novels were turned into plays, and the audiences flocked to theatres, eager to see great spectacle and lavish effects, especially those shows that featured real horses, realistic shipwrecks, train crashes on stage and things like that.

There was also a great demand for opera, and singers like Jenny Lind (“The Swedish Nightingale”) and Adelina Patti became enormously rich as a result. Another hugely popular theatre form was something called “pantomime” - a combination of fairy-tale, knockabout comedy, song and dance which is still a part of the British Christmas tradition to this very day. Entertainers like the clown, Grimaldi, and the Pantomime performer, Dan Leno, became extremely famous.



Dion Boucicault (1820-1890)

The most successful playwright of the mid-19th Century was Dion Boucicault. He was a very handsome Irishman and a popular actor. He was 19 years old when his play “London Assurance” (1839) became a hit. He wrote or adapted more than 200 plays, including his most famous play, “The Corsican Brothers” (1852). A great scandal erupted when he abandoned his legal wife and ran away to America with a young actress, and went through a marriage ceremony in New York.

He continued to write large numbers of plays, often on Irish themes and characters, and had great success with “The Colleen Bawn” (1860), and a play called “The Poor of New York” which was performed throughout America and Great Britain (with its title changed to the name of each city it played!) He became an American citizen in 1873. His plays have been occasionally revived in recent times, and he is generally felt to be one of the very few 19th Century playwrights worthy of revival.



Oscar Wilde 1854-1900

Oscar Wilde, poet, novelist, and wit, is the most important playwright of the 19th Century. However, since most of his plays were written in the very last decade of that century, he has much more in common with the writers of the early years of the 20th century.

He was an Irishman, born in Dublin. His father was a surgeon and his mother a poet, and Oscar himself proved to be an excellent scholar, winning prizes at the Universities in Dublin and Oxford. With his charm, his flamboyant dress style and his natural wit, he was soon very well known in London society.

He originally worked as a journalist. In 1884 he married and had two sons, and it was for his own boys that he wrote a book of children's stories, "The Happy Prince and Other Tales".

The success of this led him to write a novel, "The Picture of Dorian Gray"(1890), a dark tale where the central character, addicted to good living, has a dreadful secret : he remains young and handsome while his portrait grows ugly as a result of his moral decline.

In addition to these works, and his lecture tours in America, and his self-promotion, he also wrote nine plays. These were all very successful and earned him more fame and more money. One of these plays, "The Importance of Being Earnest" has been recognized as one of the best ever comedies written in the English language and has become an acknowledged classic.

The scandal that destroyed Oscar Wilde

In 1895 ,when he was at the peak of his fame and fortune, he became involved in a scandal that was to destroy him. He had been having a gay affair with a handsome, rich and vain young nobleman, Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed "Bosie". Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensbury, accused Oscar Wilde of being a homosexual which at this time was illegal in Great Britain. To protect his reputation, Oscar Wilde denied this and sued the Marquess for slander. Oscar lost the case and was immediately charged with breaking the law. He was charged with homosexual offences, found guilty and sentenced to two years' hard labour.

After his release from prison in 1897 he went to live in France, living under the assumed name of Sebastian Melmoth. However, his reputation and his health were ruined, and three years later he died in Paris, aged just 46.

The major plays of Oscar Wilde

1892 Lady Windermere's Fan

A comedy. The priggish Lady Windermere, believing her husband to be having an affair with Mrs Erlynne, confides in her friend, Lord Darlington. When Lord Windermere discovers his wife's fan in Lord Darlington's apartments, Mrs Erlynne self-sacrificingly claims that she dropped it there, suggesting that she herself had an assignation with Darlington.

1893 A Woman of No Importance

A comedy. Lord Illingworth dismisses his former mistress, Mrs Arbuthnot, as a "woman of no importance", unaware that Gerald, the young man he decides to employ as his secretary, is in fact their son. When he tries to seduce Gerald's fiancée, Mrs Arbuthnot reveals the truth.

1894 Salomé

A tragedy first performed in Paris. The title role was written for the French actress Sarah Bernhardt. This is a version of the story of the beheading of John the Baptist at the request of Salomé, who is portrayed as a dissipated neurotic. (The play was banned in England until 1931)

1895 An Ideal Husband

A comedy. The play revolves around blackmail and political corruption, and touches on the themes of public and private honour. The action is set in London, in "the present", and takes place over the course of twenty four hours. "Sooner or later," Wilde notes, "we shall all have to pay for what we do." But he adds that, "No one should be entirely judged by their past."

1895 The Importance of Being Earnest (*)

Jack Worthing, a wealthy young orphan, lives in London but has another house in the country. Jack also has a young ward (**) named Cecily, who lives in his country house, cared for by a tutor/chaperone, Miss Prism.

Jack's friend, Algernon, decides to pay a secret visit to the country house to see if Cecily is as pretty as she is said to be. To gain admission he pretends to be Jack's (fictitious) younger brother, Ernest. Meantime Jack himself is in love with Algernon's cousin, Gwendoline, but needs the approval of Gwendoline's mother before they can get married.

Gwendoline's mother is the formidable Lady Bracknell, who refuses to allow the marriage because Jack's family background is unknown. She is totally horrified to learn that Jack was discovered abandoned in a traveling bag at a London railway station. Even though he was adopted by a wealthy man and given wealth and status, his unknown parentage makes such a marriage impossible.

The story continues at a breakneck speed, with its basic theme of upsetting the rigid rules of high society. A marriage between the higher and lower classes is a threat to society's status quo. Lady Bracknell's refusal to permit any such change in the order of society is presented as a political as well as a social and moral issue.

But it is also a brilliantly comic play, exceptionally witty and beautifully constructed. We are prevented from finding it too political or satirical because of its high spirits and its deep good humour. The fast moving, farcical plot turns the whole play into a kind of surrealist experience carried along by nothing but its own exhilarating momentum.

However, a darker subtext is there all the time. The play revolves around guilty secrets, false identities, disreputable origins, all of which have a troubling significance for its author. This sparkling comedy which includes some of Wilde's wittiest dialogue is continually revived and thought to be one of the all-time great comedies of English Literature.

(*)The title is a piece of word-play. "Ernest" was a very common first-name for Englishmen at that time, and although it sounds the same, it has nothing to do with the adjective "Earnest", which means serious, thoughtful and sincere.

(**) A "ward" means a young person who is being protected, cared for and educated by someone who is not a parent or relative. In modern times there is a legal process of "adopting" a child, but in Victorian times this did not exist. The child would become a "ward".



Salomé, an original illustration from the first edition by Aubrey Beardsley, a leading "decadent" artist

The poem published under the name “C.3.3.”

1898 The Ballad of Reading Gaol

This was a poem written after his release from Reading Prison. Its main theme is the death by hanging of one of Wilde’s fellow-prisoners. Wilde claims we are all malefactors, all in need of forgiveness. The poem was published under his prison number “C.3.3” which ensured that Wilde’s name did not appear on the book’s front cover. The poem contains the very famous lines:

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

The Aesthetic and Decadent Movements

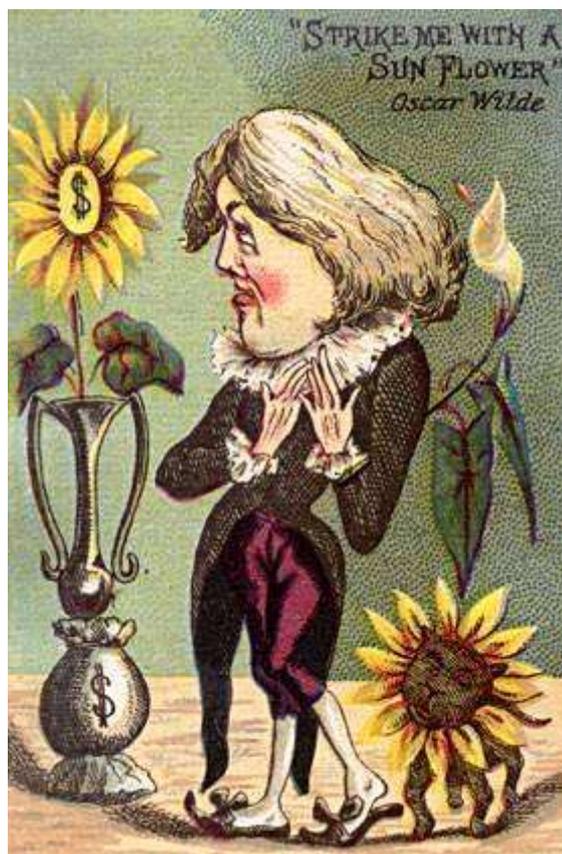
Oscar Wilde is often considered to be a representative of the “Aesthetic Movement”, also known as “l’*esprit d’écadent*” - a new approach to poetics, philosophy and poetry created by French writers between 1880 and 1890. This was a literary movement which would have some influence on later writers.

The “decadent spirit” was one that rejected any moral or religious restraint. The French “decadents” had a horror of the ordinary and sought any new sensation, no matter how shocking that might be to “normal” society. The movement primarily was seeking “true” beauty, and this was to be found in art itself – not just in “pretty” pictures, or idealized situations. “True” beauty could be found in the brothels as well as in the palaces.

When these ideas first came to England the emphasis was changed slightly, with great importance given to the search for true beauty and “art for art’s sake”. Initially this English movement was called the “Aesthetic Movement”. Within a few years the English aesthetes had adopted more and more of the Decadents’ ideas – so that by the end of the century the English Aesthetes and the French Decadents were, more or less, the same as each other.

The leader of the English aesthetes was Oscar Wilde, and he and his followers initially began by worshipping “Beauty” and cultivating the ideal “art for art’s sake”. They adopted a sensation-seeking lifestyle that shocked High Victorian morality. As the century drew to a close, a new mood could be felt among English writers and artists, poets and painters .

This mood is captured perfectly in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”. There was no organized “movement” nor even a common philosophy- just a new spirit, known variously as “aestheticism”, “decadence”, or simply “fin de siècle” (end of century). But these ideas and especially the behaviour of the people involved seemed, to ordinary people, to be very shocking.



Satirists had great fun mocking Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetes, especially on his lecture tours of America

Throughout the literary works of Oscar Wilde there are constant reminders of his early aestheticism and his later support of the decadent movement. Many of the Aesthetic themes emerge in his works:

- Art for Art's Sake
- Extravagance and self indulgence
- Society's rules to be turned upside down
- Disregard for middle-class morality
- Approval of the perverse and the paradoxical

and echoes and examples of this can be found through much of his writing.

A world turned upside down

His comedies, especially "Lady Windermere's Fan", "A Woman of No Importance" and "An Ideal Husband", all deal with the British class structure and the inherent snobbery and hypocrisy of the upper classes and the society in which they moved.

His literary style enabled him to present his themes with glittering "epigrams" (phrases which create an amusing contrast between what is said and what is meant.) The plays are filled with delightful examples of flippancy and snobbery, and are full of abrupt shifts in attitudes and judgment. They capture a flowing and very funny mood of "irresponsibility" and artifice which runs through this society. Both the wit of the dialogue and the polished and anti-sentimental writing style contrast strongly with the underlying satire.

On the surface Wilde is presenting himself as a satirist of upper-class society and a moral critic. However his plays also contain a radical undercurrent of boredom, disillusion, alienation and, occasionally, real feeling.



Oscar Wilde with Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie")

The wit of Oscar Wilde

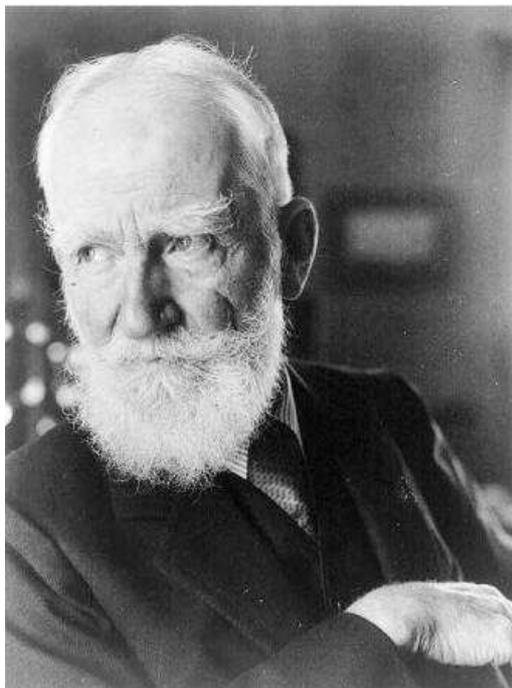
- On entering the USA the customs officer asked "Have you anything to declare?" Wilde replied: "Nothing, except my talent."
- I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.
- We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.
- Work is the curse of the drinking classes
- Of men who go foxhunting: "The unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable."
- As he lay dying in a cheap French hotel bedroom, he looked at the walls and said "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do"

Drama in the 20th Century

The first half of the century

During the first half of the 20th Century English drama was re-vitalised, mainly through the works of two completely different playwrights, completely different in style, character and personality. George Bernard Shaw was a teetotaller (*), vegetarian (*), a supporter of women's rights and a writer much concerned with social and moral problems.

Noel Coward was an actor, singer, song-writer and playwright whose flippant wit and outrageous behaviour made him a successor to Oscar Wilde. He was sophisticated, fiercely patriotic, loved the high-life of good wines and cocktails, expensive clothes, and enjoyed shocking people with his behaviour.



George Bernard Shaw

(*) A "teetotaller" is someone who never drinks any alcohol, and a "vegetarian" is some one who never eats any meat.

The word "teetotaller" sounds as if it should be someone who only drinks tea - "a cup of tea" being known as the English national drink! However, it has nothing to do with tea, and comes from a double emphasis of the capital letter "T" "T-Total" similar to "D-Day", where the "D" also means nothing.

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

George Bernard Shaw, one of the greatest names in 20th Century British Theatre, died at the age of 94. He was an Irishman who dominated the first half of the century with plays like "Man and Superman" (1903) and "Pygmalion"(*) (1912) - and has long been recognised as a great playwright. He began his literary career as a critic and became a passionate advocate of the realistic plays of the Norwegian writer, Henrik Ibsen.

In the 1890s he began to write plays of his own, concerned with social problems like slum landlords ("Widower's Houses" 1892), prostitution ("Mrs Warren's Profession" 1902), and the political and moral problems facing society. He also revealed a gift for sparkling comedy with plays like "Arms and the Man" (1894) and he gradually won public acceptance as a worthy playwright rather than a mere spokesman for political movements like the Fabian Society.

In 1914 he published "Common Sense about the War", a pacifist essay which caused outrage at the time and led to calls for him to be jailed as a public enemy. By the early 1920s the public had forgiven him - possibly because the reality of the Great War led many to agree with his earlier views - and with his plays "Back to Methuselah" (1921) and "Saint Joan" (1924) he was once more established as Britain's leading playwright.

(* "Pygmalion" is famous for two reasons. It was the first play in England to use a forbidden swear word on stage, with the phrase "Not bloody likely". Nowadays this is a most innocent expression, but in 1912 it was shocking and caused a great fuss when Shaw refused to censor it. In 1956 the play was turned into the musical "My Fair Lady" - one of the greatest ever successes in the world of musical theatre and operetta.)

In 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Throughout the 1930s he made long lecture tours, including one to Soviet Russia, preaching his stern morality of individual responsibility, self-discipline, heroic effort without thought of reward, and utmost integrity. He was a deliberately outspoken figure who enjoyed stirring up controversy and, in his advanced old age, enjoyed his position as a Legend of British Theatre.

When his death was announced the British Prime Minister gave a special tribute in the House of Commons; the Indian High Commissioner said “India has lost one the greatest non-Indian champions of India’s freedom”; and in Washington, President Truman said “the world has lost a pre-eminent figure who left the indelible print of his genius on a prodigious literary output”. All the theatres on New York’s Broadway and in London’s West End turned off their lights as a tribute to a brilliant playwright.



Noel Coward (1899-1973)

In one of his many song lyrics - this one was called “If Love Were All” and contained a hardly hidden theme of gay love - Noel Coward summed up his own life with the words:

But I believe that since my life began,
The most I’ve had is just a talent to amuse,
Hey ho – if love were all.

This was a very modest understatement. Noel Coward’s “talent to amuse” delighted audiences from the 1920s onwards, and for six decades he was a leading force in the world of plays, musical theatre, revue, cabaret and song-writing. His talents ranged from acting to writing, from directing to composing, and he was, perhaps, the most famous living Englishman.

He began his career as a child actor at the age of 11 and by the time he was 25 he was an established playwright with “The Vortex”, a shocking domestic drama, about a mother and her drug-addicted son, and “Hay Fever”, an extremely funny social comedy.

Noel Coward cultivated an image of smoking-jackets, a silk scarf and long cigarette holder, and he became the leader of the smart, witty sophisticated young artists who dominated the years between the two wars.

After the Second World War his output seemed a little out-of-date, though he became much in demand as a cabaret star. In recent years he has been re-appraised, and by the time of his death was recognised as a major playwright of the century.

His major plays included “Hay Fever” (1925), “Private Lives” (1930), “Design for Living” (1933), “Blithe Spirit”(1941), “This Happy Breed” (1943) and “Nude with Violin” (1956). His musicals included “Bitter Sweet” (1929), and his patriotic pieces included “Cavalcade” (1931), and the classic film “In Which We Serve” (1942). One of his short stories was developed into the film “Brief Encounter” (1945), which encapsulated the spirit of Britain in the 1940s in much the same way his early plays had done for the 1930s. His songs included the highly satirical “Mad Dogs and Englishmen”.

His versatility was enormous, and his wit was legendary. He was knighted with the title “Sir Noel Coward” in 1970. He died of a heart-attack in his mountain-top home in Jamaica at the age of 74.

The second half of the 20th Century

During the second half of the 20th Century a very large number of significant playwrights appeared, and it is possible that, in time to come, this will be regarded as something of a Golden Age for British Drama. From the end of the Second World War onwards serious theatre was chiefly coming from America in the shape of the playwrights Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. British Theatre was still subject to official censorship, and was either amusing light entertainment, or skilfully crafted but dealing with careful and “safe” subjects.

The impact of “Post Modernism” (dealt with in a separate part of this book) brought a number of new young playwrights to prominence. Each one of them was pushing the boundaries imposed by the official censor. Throughout the 1950s all manner of attempts to avoid censorship were tried, including turning theatres into private clubs for members only. Gradually the censorship rules were relaxed. Then, finally in 1968 all theatre censorship was abolished. And a new era in playwriting was born.

However, the two outstanding figures of British Theatre through this time were Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.



Samuel Beckett (1920-1989)

Samuel Beckett is undoubtedly one of the most important and influential writers of the 20th century. He is best known as the leading dramatist of the 1950s movement called “Theatre of the Absurd” (*) and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

He was an Irishman who got a job teaching English in Paris, where he met and was much influenced by fellow-Irishman, James Joyce. Eventually he decided to live permanently in Paris and to try and earn a living as a full-time writer. During World War II he worked as a member of the French Resistance, fighting against the German occupation of France.

His early works were novels which he wrote in French and then later translated into English. His 1953 play “Waiting for Godot” brought him international fame. His works are extremely complex and deal with difficult questions. His characters often seem to be full of despair about death and people’s failure to communicate with each other. His play

“Endgame” (1957)

consists of two people buried up to their necks in rubbish-bins, from which they occasionally stick out their heads to speak. This play deals with the subject of despair and the will to survive in spite of an incomprehensible world.

“Krapp’s Last Tape” (1958)

has only one person onstage, a man certain that he has the talent to change the world with his art. However, his certainty is worn down by doubt and despair, and he realises that nothing will ever be different and his masterpiece has had no effect whatsoever in the world. This is one of Beckett’s most ironic and chilling works.

(*) The word “Absurd” in the phrase “Theatre of the Absurd” is a difficult one. The usual meaning of “absurd” is something comical, silly and ridiculous. However, in this special context it was used to mean “something that makes no sense, something that has no real meaning”. Therefore it was a view that Life itself has no meaning, no purpose—a bleak and negative idea that there is no real purpose in existence itself.

“Happy Days” (1961)

Written in English and considered Beckett's most cheerful piece, “Happy Days” features a woman called Winnie buried up to her waist in a mound of sand. Her husband, Willie, appears only occasionally from a tunnel behind the heap of sand. Winnie's opening words, 'Another heavenly day', start a long monologue during which she makes herself busy with the contents of her enormous handbag. She follows the routine of the day – praying, brushing her teeth, reminiscing about the past and endlessly trying to recall 'unforgettable lines' that she has once read. By the end of the second act she is buried up to her neck, but she carries on chattering cheerfully. Her last lines are “Ah well, what matter, that's what I always say, it will have been a happy day after all, another happy day.”

Waiting for Godot (1953)

“Waiting for Godot” is about two characters, Estragon and Vladimir, (representing all of mankind) waiting by a tree in a country road . At one point, Estragon and Vladimir discuss the tree and decide to hang themselves from it. In Act Two, the tree has become considerably greener, causing the men to doubt whether they are in the right place at the right time. They are waiting for someone called Godot (representing man's search for meaning in life), but Godot never appears, only two other men, Pozzo and Lucky.

The play is divided into two acts, with five basic identical parts to each act. These parts are:

- Estragon and Vladimir alone
- Entrance of Pozzo and Lucky
- Departure of Pozzo and Lucky
- Arrival of Messenger, and
- Estragon and Vladimir alone once again.

One famous quote from a critic called Vivian Mercer says that with this play Beckett "has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice." - Since then the play is often referred to as the play in which “nothing happens, twice”.

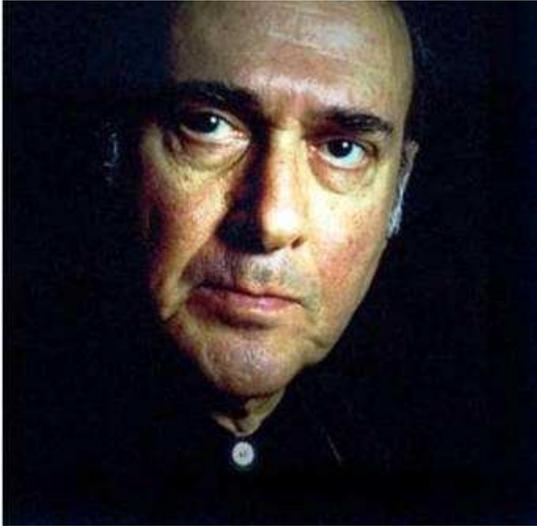


“Waiting for Godot” - the play in which nothing happens—twice!

In spite of this dark side, the play has much humour, so that although “Waiting for Godot” has a despairing message it is also one of the theatre's great comedies.

As he became older his plays became stranger. His play “Breath” consists of a pile of rubbish on the stage: the curtain rises and the audience hears an intake of breath, followed by a cry—and that is it. End of play! (The whole of man's existence is a breath and a cry of pain.)

Harold Pinter (1930-2008)



Harold Pinter is unique amongst contemporary dramatists. His works have had a profound influence on fellow playwrights throughout the Western world and his highly charged plays are held up as masterpieces of the 20th Century.

In addition, he has received more and greater honours than any other living playwright, including the Nobel Prize for Literature on 2005.

As a playwright, poet, actor, director, and screenwriter he was the most original, stylish and enigmatic writer in post-war British theatre. His major works created a new atmosphere and tension in theatre. This was achieved by holding back information about the characters and their motives—not telling the audience vital information - something which up to then had

been thought essential to the audience's enjoyment of a play.

His works were usually set within the closed-in confines of one room, poor and dirty in his earlier plays, but increasingly elegant in his later works. They dealt with confrontation between a variety of people, from vagrants and prostitutes to middle-class married couples and self-proclaimed poets. They were usually set in circumstances of underlying menace or violence and always phrased in language that was precise, elegant and often very funny.

One feature of his plays was a frequent long pause, with no words being spoken on the stage. This was to reflect real life, where there are often long pauses in everyday conversation. Sometimes these pauses could be very long, and disturbing for an audience used to the artificiality of theatre dialogue. This became known as the "Pinter pause". His works also created a new adjective: "Pinteresque" - meaning a situation full of the unknown, sinister and possibly threatening.

In 1980 he was involved in a much publicised and bitter divorce from his actress wife , who died shortly after. He received a lot of bad publicity in the popular newspapers, and for a while he became a kind of "hate-figure" for his supposed bad treatment of his former wife.

This began a change of style in his plays. His work now became much angrier, with a strong emphasis on his political beliefs, his strong anti-Americanism, and left-wing activism. He became more and more angry when being interviewed for newspapers and television and he quickly developed a reputation for his fiery and uncontrollable temper. However, none of this affected the great admiration and influence of his works. He will clearly be remembered as one of the most influential, and possibly greatest playwrights of the 20th Century. He died on Christmas Eve, 2008 at the age of 78.

His main works are:

- 1958 The Birthday Party
- 1960 The Caretaker
- 1960 The Dumb Waiter
- 1965 The Homecoming
- 1971 Old Times
- 1975 No Man's Land