



Tikrit University
College of education for Women
English Department

Subject: Drama

Stage: Second Year

Title: MASTERPIECES OF MODERN ONE-ACT DRAMA

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MASTERPIECES OF MODERN ONE-ACT

DRAMA

A Comprehensive Analysis of Riders to the Sea, Act Without Words I, and The Stronger

The one-act play represents a concentrated form of theatrical art. Constrained by time and space, it demands exceptional narrative economy, razor-sharp characterization, and total thematic focus. Unlike multi-act plays that allow for elaborate subplots and gradual character arcs, the single-act structure plunges the audience directly into a critical nexus of conflict, realization, or existentially charged crisis. This comparative critical study examines three foundational works of modern single-act drama: John Millington Synge's poetic Irish tragedy *Riders to the Sea* (1904), Samuel Beckett's absurdist mime *Act Without Words I* (1956), and August Strindberg's psychological monologue-drama *The Stronger* (1889).

1. RIDERS TO THE SEA (1904)

Author Biography: John Millington Synge (1871–1909)

J.M. Synge was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and a co-founder of Dublin's Abbey Theatre alongside W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. Born in Rathfarnham, Ireland, Synge studied music and languages before travelling across Europe. Following a pivotal suggestion by Yeats, Synge spent extended periods living among the peasant communities of the remote Aran Islands. This immersion deeply influenced his dramatic sensibilities, inspiring him to capture the rhythmic, poetic cadence of Hiberno-English speech and the harsh, tragic realities of coastal Irish peasant existence. His works, including *The Playboy of the Western World*, bridge mythic folklore and stark modern realism.

PLOT OVERVIEW

Set in a modest cottage on an Aran Island off the western coast of Ireland, the narrative opens with Cathleen and Nora quietly examining clothes recovered from a drowned man washed up in Donegal, attempting to determine if they belong to their missing brother, Michael. Their mother, Maurya, has already lost her father, husband, and four other sons to the relentless Atlantic Ocean. Despite Maurya's desperate pleas and premonitions of doom, her last surviving son, Bartley, insists on sailing to the mainland to sell horses at the Galway fair. Shortly after Bartley leaves, Maurya experiences a visionary phantom of Michael riding behind Bartley on a grey pony—an infallible omen of death in local folklore. Moments later, villagers carry Bartley's lifeless body into the cottage; he has been thrown from his horse into the turbulent sea. The play closes with Maurya's tragic, transcendent resignation to fate.

KEY THEMES & SYMBOLISM

Man vs. Nature & Fatalism: The sea is the ultimate antagonist—an unyielding, indifferent deity that dictates life and death for the islanders. Human effort against nature is rendered futile.

Grief, Loss, and Spiritual Resignation: Maurya's emotional trajectory transforms from paralyzing anxiety to a stoic, quiet peace once the ocean has taken every male member of her family, leaving nature with nothing left to claim.

Pagan Symbolism vs. Christian Faith: Christian rituals and holy water prove powerless against the ancient, mythic force of the ocean, highlighting a deep synthesis of Celtic folklore and orthodox Catholicism.

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

Synge utilizes an astonishingly poetic Hiberno-English dialect, elevating regional peasant prose into rhythmic, elegiac verse. The unities of time, place, and action are strictly maintained, creating a suffocating atmosphere of inevitable doom within the confined cottage space.

IMPORTANT QUOTES & TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

"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 upcrying and praying when the wind breaks from the south..."

Analysis: Spoken by Maurya upon Bartley's death. This quote embodies the tragic climax of the play: total despair paradoxically gives birth to absolute peace. With all her sons dead, the sea no longer holds power over her mind.

"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 forever, and we must be satisfied."

Analysis: The closing lines of the play. Maurya reconciles human mortality with spiritual acceptance, offering an enduring statement on human resilience in the face of universal suffering.

2. ACT WITHOUT WORDS I (1956)

Author Biography: Samuel Beckett (1906–1989)

Samuel Beckett was an Irish avant-garde playwright, novelist, and poet who spent most of his adult life in Paris, writing in both French and English. A key luminary of the Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969. His works—most notably *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*—are celebrated for their minimalist staging, bleak existential philosophy, black humor, and profound exploration of human suffering, isolation, and the breakdown of communication in a post-WWII world.

PLOT OVERVIEW

Set in a sunbaked, desert landscape illuminated by dazzling light, a single male protagonist is flung backwards onto the stage. Whistles from the offstage wings draw his attention, but whenever he attempts to exit, he is violently thrown back into the space. A series of objects are descended from above via ropes: a small palm tree offering a tiny patch of shade (which closes when he approaches), a carafe of water teasingly suspended just out of reach, large cubes, and ropes. The Man attempts to construct logical apparatuses—stacking cubes and using ropes—to reach the water, but the objects are repeatedly pulled back into the flies by an unseen force. Realizing the total futility of his efforts, the Man refuses to respond to any further whistles or lures, remaining entirely motionless on the desert floor as the curtain falls.

KEY THEMES & SYMBOLISM

Existential Absurdity & Sisyphus-like Struggle: The play is a stark allegory of the human condition (reminiscent of the Myth of Sisyphus), where human endeavors to achieve meaning or fulfillment are thwarted by an indifferent or sadistically playful universe.

The Illusion of Free Will: The protagonist believes he is exercising ingenuity and choice, yet all his actions are conditioned responses to external stimuli (whistles and dropped objects).

Passive Resistance & Nihilism: The final rejection of action—refusing to respond to the whistle or try for the water—represents the protagonist's only true act of autonomy: absolute refusal to participate in an absurd game.

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

Beckett strips the dramatic form down to its barest essentials: pure movement, mime, sound cues, and visual metaphor. By removing language entirely, the play bypasses verbal rationalization and presents a raw, universally accessible existential image.

IMPORTANT STAGE DIRECTIONS & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

[Stage Direction] "He looks at his hands... He turns, looks at the carafe, reflects, goes back to the cubes, takes up the small cube, carries it over and sets it down under the carafe..."

Analysis: Highlights the innate human drive toward rational problem-solving and optimism. The protagonist relies on intellect and tool-making, only to have the environment alter its rules to guarantee his failure.

[Stage Direction] "The whistle from above. He does not move... He looks at his hands."

Analysis: The climax of the mime. The character achieves a state of stoic realization. By relinquishing desire and physical effort, he strips the unseen tormentor of its power over him.

THE STRONGER (1889)

Author Biography: August Strindberg (1849–1912)

August Strindberg was a pioneering Swedish playwright, novelist, and painter, recognized as one of the fathers of modern theater. His expansive literary career evolved from intense Naturalism (*Miss Julie*, *The Father*) to early Expressionism and Symbolism (*A Dream Play*, *The Ghost Sonata*). Renowned for his psychological depth, fiery temperament, and volatile personal life, Strindberg's works meticulously examine battle-of-the-sexes power struggles, social hypocrisy, sub rosa psychological warfare, and the complex nature of human identity.

PLOT OVERVIEW & DRAMATIC ARC

The entire action takes place in a quiet ladies' cafe on Christmas Eve. Mrs. X, an established married actress, encounters her unmarried friend and fellow actress, Miss Y, sitting alone reading magazines. Mrs. X begins a continuous, detailed monologue, sharing Christmas shopping stories and domestic updates. Miss Y remains completely silent throughout the entire encounter, responding only with subtle gestures, laughs, or glares. As Mrs. X continues talking, her stream of consciousness shifts from casual gossip to deep suspicion, eventually asserting that Miss Y was her husband Bob's lover. Mrs. X realizes that her own tastes, clothing, and domestic habits were subtly molded by Miss Y's influence. However, Mrs. X concludes by claiming ultimate victory: she possesses the husband, home, and family, while Miss Y sits alone. Mrs. X departs triumphantly, leaving Miss Y silent in the cafe.

KEY THEMES & SYMBOLISM

Power Dynamics & Psychological Dominance: The play poses an enigmatic question: Who is truly the "stronger" character? Is it Mrs. X, who dominates the speech and retains her social position, or Miss Y, whose silence forces Mrs. X to unravel her secrets and insecurities?

Identity Infiltration & Parasitism: Mrs. X realizes her home and persona were colonized by Miss Y's preferences, raising questions about whether identity is authentic or absorbed from rivals.

Silence as a Dramatic Weapon: Miss Y's silence acts as a psychological mirror, forcing Mrs. X into self-analysis and vulnerability without Miss Y uttering a single word.

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

Strindberg crafts a masterclass in psychological Naturalism utilizing a virtual monologue. The dynamic relies on heavy subtext, micro-expressions, and internal psychological escalation.

IMPORTANT QUOTES & TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

"Your silence has been like a sponge, drawing all these thoughts out of me... Why don't you say something? Speak!"

Analysis: Spoken by Mrs. X. Demonstrates how silence functions as an active force in drama. Miss Y's refusal to speak deprives Mrs. X of feedback, driving her to expose her deepest anxieties.

"Thank you, Amelie, for teaching my husband how to love! Now I'm going home to love him!"

Analysis: The play's ironic climax. Mrs. X reframes her husband's emotional infidelity as a personal victory, asserting that she successfully absorbed everything Miss Y offered while retaining social and marital security.