

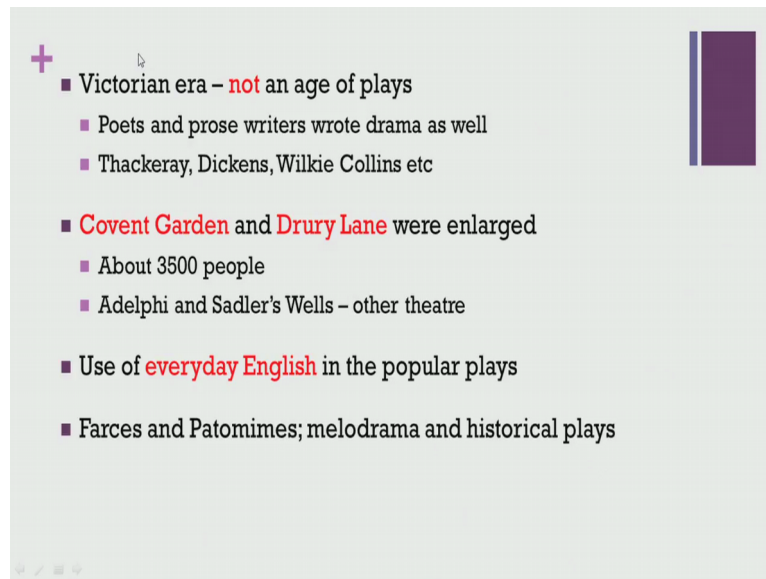
History of English Language and Literature
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Lecture 20a
Drama in the Victorian Age

Hello and welcome to yet another session of the course The History of English Language and Literature. In today's lecture we shall be looking at Drama in the Victorian Age at the outset begin with this (00:26) that drama was not a major genre in the Victorian period. The Victorian age in fact is least known as the age of prose but nevertheless as we had been doing in a discussion of the other ages and periods as well. Even when genre or particular forms of writing by getting eclipsed in an age.

It is important to highlight even the little output that was being produced in terms of that particular genre. This is important for us to know how various genres were fairs at various points of time and also seem to see how literary (00:59) were getting shifted due to the socio-political events and the socio-political concerns of particular times. So in order to continue building a structure coherence and continuity into our discussion of literary history.

Here we go taking a look at Victorian Drama though the output was quite marginal. Most of the drama of this period was produced because many of the writers who were also prose and novelist they also wanted to experiment in different forms of writing. They also noticed it in the earlier discussion where some of the poets also had shown a lot of interest in writing a couple of dramas.

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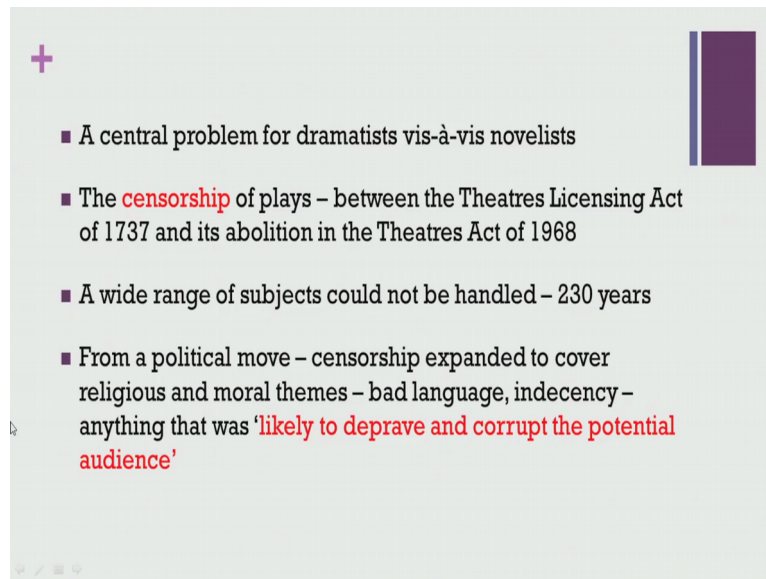
So many of these writers were also novelist such as Thackeray, Dickens and Wilkie Collins though the output in terms of drama was quite limited.

We noted that from the early 19th century onwards throughout the romantic period drama continued to be a quite a popular form the theatre going activity had not really come down infact they were two major patented playhouses Covent Garden and Drury Lane they were enlarged during this time they could house about 3500 people at a single time and two other theatres were also quite prominent Adelphi and Sadler's Wells.

So find a lot of place getting staged in these playhouses doing quite well in terms of prime new generation which also indicates that the play going was a one of the important leisure activities of those times. In the popular place of those times a lot of everyday English is being used. So the dramatic English is no longer separate from the English which is used in the streets and we also find an adaptation of most of the earlier successful place being done at the Victorian period.

If we try to look at the kind of drama which was dominating the Victorian period was mostly Farces and Patomimes, we also find a melodramatic and historical plays as well. In the Victorian period the dramatis faced a central problem in comparison to the novelist vis-à-vis the novelist they were not really free to write about anything that also had placed a severe constrain on their genius and also on the ir power of expression.

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- A central problem for dramatists vis-à-vis novelists
- The **copyright** of plays – between the Theatres Licensing Act of 1737 and its abolition in the Theatres Act of 1968
- A wide range of subjects could not be handled – 230 years
- From a political move – censorship expanded to cover religious and moral themes – bad language, indecency – anything that was **'likely to deprave and corrupt the potential audience'**

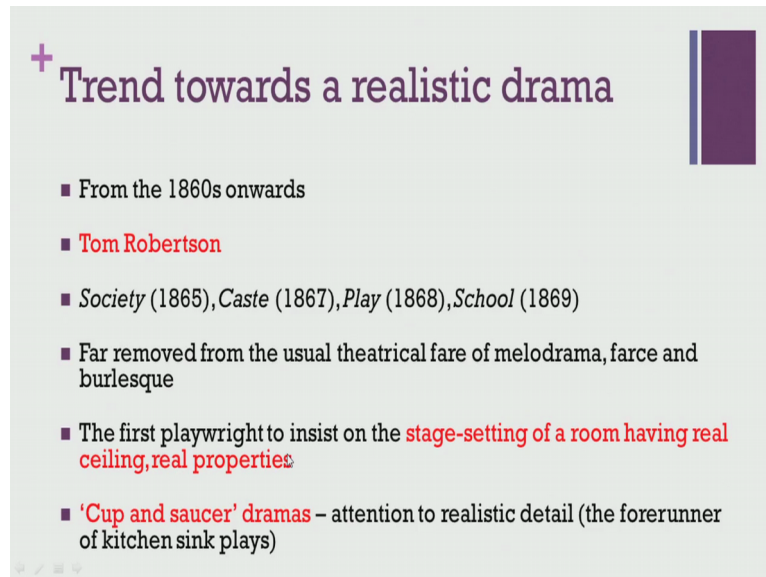
If we recall we had already taken a look at the censorship of plays which came into being with the Theatres Licensing Act of 1737 and its abolition in 1968 which was a period of about 230 years. We find the output of drama being severely constrained and restricted. So during this period we also notice that a wide range of subjects were not being allowed to be handled on stage because it was seen that many of the things could be could form a corrupting influence on the popular audience. That will also lead us to another question, how about the other genres and how about the other forms of writing which were also (03:35) unquote the popular audience.

But again it is important to highlight that some of these things did have a political origin and we find all of this continuing into the literary and other artistic forms of expression. For instance the Theatres Licensing Act of 1737 initially we know that it was a political move, it will be useful to recall some of the events that led to this censorship act and also the turn of events which had commenced from the restoration period onwards. As we recall it, it was mainly a political move to begin with.

But however we find this censorship expanding to cover other aspects and other areas of life as well. So there is a restriction being imposed on religious and moral themes as well. It is no longer dominated by the political tendencies or the shifting loyalties. But it is also about even trivial things such as a use of bad language on stage or any kind of proposal of indecency and altogether we find the authorities trying to ban anything and everything which is likely to deprave and corrupt the potential audience.

This being a very abstract kind of understanding it was quite impossible to bring in anything which could offend anyone in terms of a moral or even any kind of religious a sensibility.

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+ Trend towards a realistic drama

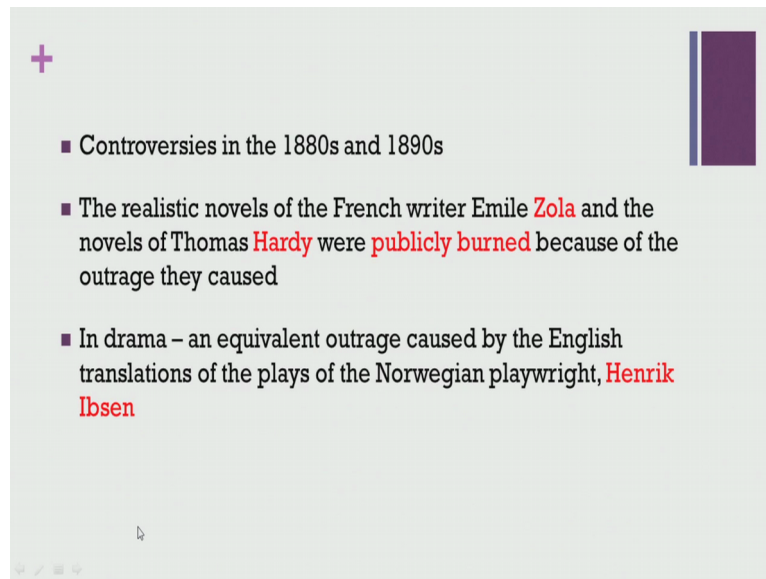
- From the 1860s onwards
- **Tom Robertson**
- *Society* (1865), *Caste* (1867), *Play* (1868), *School* (1869)
- Far removed from the usual theatrical fare of melodrama, farce and burlesque
- The first playwright to insist on the **stage-setting of a room having real ceiling, real properties**
- **'Cup and saucer' dramas** – attention to realistic detail (the forerunner of kitchen sink plays)

In spite of all of this dominating events we find the Victorian drama gradually but steadily moving towards a realistic form of depiction this happens from the 1860's onwards. In that sense it is very important to highlight the contributions and the significance of the playwright Tom Robertson.

If we go through the titles of his plays we can almost sense the kind of place that he was producing *Society* in 1865, *A Caste* in 1867, *Play* in 1868 and *School* in 1869. We find that all of his works were quite removed from the melodramatic depictions of that time he is also more responsive to the society and tries to imbibe the spirit of the Victorian temper. He also had rejected the usual conventions of farce and burlesque and had moved towards a more realistic depiction.

Accordingly it is important to highlight the fact that he is the first playwright to insist on stage setting of a room having real ceiling and real properties. So this was a first move towards realist drama and he is also seen as the initiator of what has later come to be known as Cup and Saucer dramas and this in fact was a kind of drama which paid a lot of realist attention to detail and this is in stark contrast with the earlier kind of drama which could be staged with a mere representative prop which was placed on the stage. The Cup and Saucer drama initiated by Tom Robertson could be seen as the forerunner of kitchen sink plays about which we shall be taking a look at when we talk about the 20th century drama.

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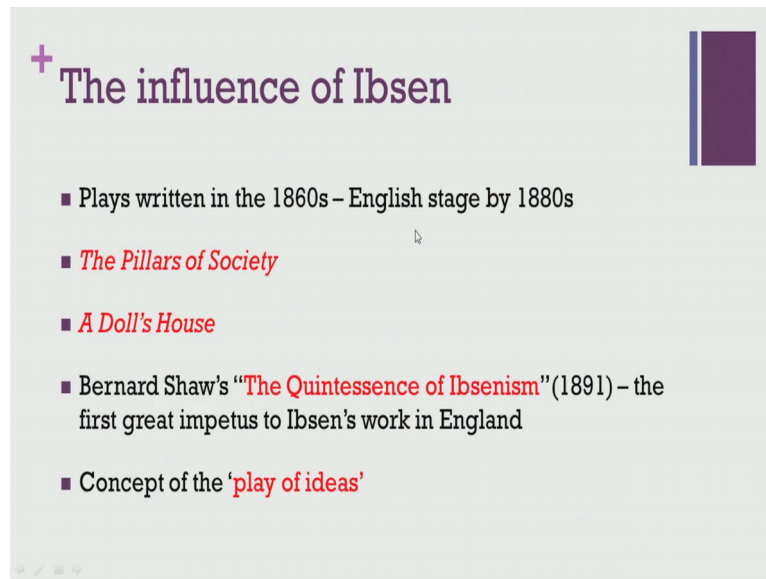


But in spite of this many promising tendencies which were dominating the Victorian stage there were also a lot of controversies that emerged in the 1880's and 1890's which hampered the growth of the stage activities as well. Later in our discussion in the English novel we shall also be noticing that and this was the period when the realist form of artistic expression was gaining a lot of popularity. But however it also had led to a lot of criticism from the popular audience, accordingly we find the realist novels of the French writer Emile Zola and the popular English writer Thomas Hardy being publicly burned because of the outrage that they caused.

The Victorian England though it was quite tolerant about many kinds of expression we do find certain unreasonable reactions and outrages against certain things that they consider taboo or unacceptable or even (07:06). Realism was one such literary tendency that the Victorians initially could not tolerate at all. In drama we find this getting reflected ok because an outrage though it developed as a reaction to one particular thing we do find it spreading across genres in the Victorian period.

As a result the outrage caused by the translations of the plays of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen needs to be recalled at this time.

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The slide features a title 'The influence of Ibsen' in a purple font with a small '+' icon to its left. To the right of the title is a vertical purple bar. Below the title is a list of five bullet points, each starting with a small square icon. The text is in a dark grey font, with some words in red. At the bottom left of the slide, there are small navigation icons.

- Plays written in the 1860s – English stage by 1880s
- *The Pillars of Society*
- *A Doll's House*
- Bernard Shaw's "**The Quintessence of Ibsenism**"(1891) – the first great impetus to Ibsen's work in England
- Concept of the '**play of ideas**'

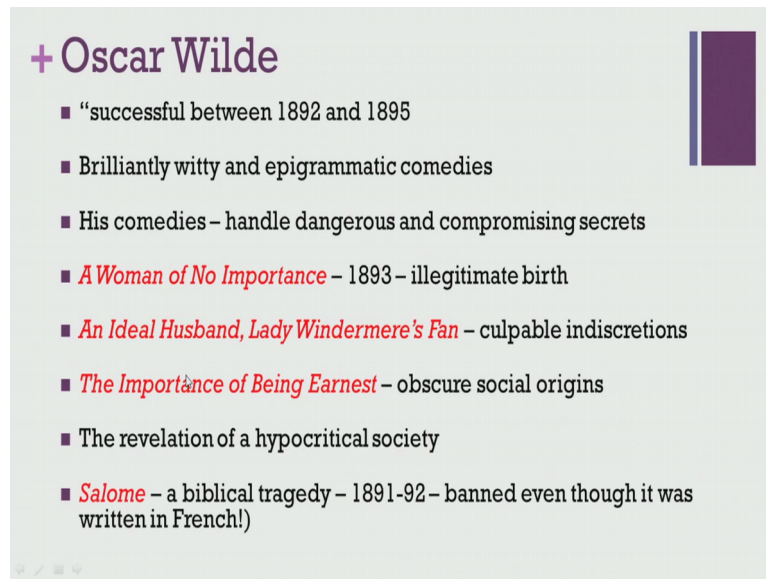
The influence of Ibsen was very memorable and extremely powerful in the Victorian stage though Ibsen wrote his plays for the Norwegian audience in the 1860's they reach the English stage only by the 1880's from then on a revolution had set an not just in the dramatic genius but also in the many things which were dominating the Victorian society in terms of a the social conventions the family institutions etc.

His important work *The Pillars of Society* and *A Doll's House* they were accepted with a lot of enthusiasm in England but they also had let to a lot of criticisms because of the kind of unconventional questioning and the challenging of authority that I did. *A Doll's House* for example was a quite influential in challenging the convention of our typical English a family, it also encouraged a lot of free thought especially from young women and this was seen as quite challenging and quite unacceptable by many of the Victorian masters of those time.

A literary event which marked the foundations of turning point in English drama was a Bernard Shaw's work *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* this work was a first essay to give an impetus to Ibsen's work in England and after that in the 20th century mostly we find the reflections of this particular genius which began to emerge from the end of the Victorian period. Ibsen and the kind of support that he garnered in the English stage it let to the emergence of what we now understand as the *Play of Ideas*.

The concept of the *Play of Ideas* was quite significant that there was a radical shift from action on the stage towards dialogues and towards a prominence of deamination of ideas.

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+ Oscar Wilde

- "successful between 1892 and 1895
- Brilliantly witty and epigrammatic comedies
- His comedies – handle dangerous and compromising secrets
- *A Woman of No Importance* – 1893 – illegitimate birth
- *An Ideal Husband, Lady Windermere's Fan* – culpable indiscretions
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* – obscure social origins
- The revelation of a hypocritical society
- *Salome* – a biblical tragedy – 1891-92 – banned even though it was written in French!

Oscar Wilde was perhaps the master of this new kind of play of ideas and he was very successful between the period 1892 and 1895 his plays were very witty and humorous it always drew a lot of audience and his best known works were in the form of epigrammatic comedies and in his comedies we find that mostly he was handling dangerous and compromising secrets.

As since it was infused with a lot of humour he could even surpass many of the censorship rules of the play and if you take a look at some of his leading plays *A Woman of No Importance* staged in 1893 was about illegitimate birth it had not been for the comic interface that Wilde wrote it. It would not have been possible to talk about such taboo subjects where plays *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* dealt with the culpable indiscretions.

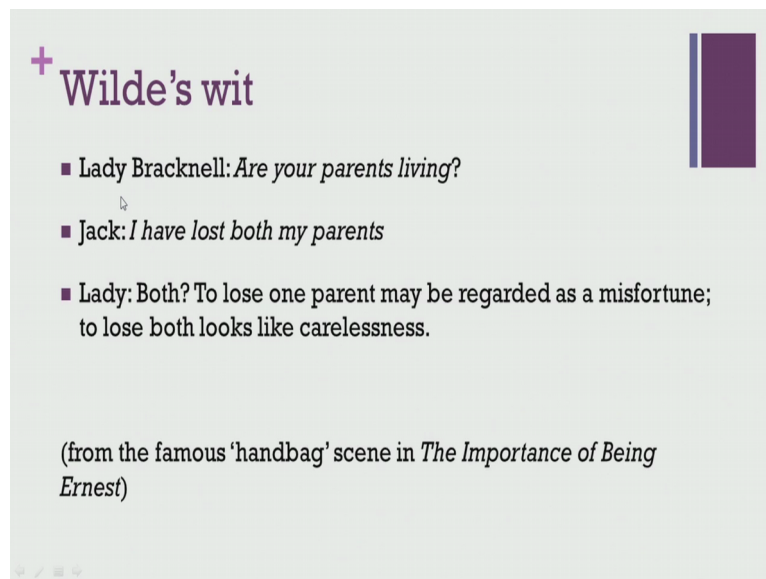
The Importance of Being Earnest so far the best known of Wilde's plays and even this continues to be staged even in the contemporary this dealt with obscure social origins and it was Wilde was extremely critical about the social hierarchy and notions of aristocracy. In most of the plays Wilde reveals the hypocrisy of the Victorian society, in that sense again is you to remember that the Victorian society though it had placed a lot of value on the outgoing religious sentiments it was also a time dominated by a lot of hypocritical thoughts.

So it was not really easy to differentiate between what the actual belief of a person was and what he outwardly had shown. This hypocrisy was mostly found within the circles of the aristocracy and in the upper middle class stratum of the society. So why was one of those who

completely exposed all of these trades and also made a lot of ridicule and fun out of it. Wilde also had to face some criticism and censorship his play *Salome* was based on a biblical tragedy and it was written in 1891-92.

Though it was written in French it was banned in the English stage as well and it was he could never stage it in any of the English theatres. Allow me to read to you a passage from *The Importance of Being Earnest* this is from the famous (11:24) scene it is also considered as one of the wittiest scenes in the English plays.

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Wilde's wit

- Lady Bracknell: *Are your parents living?*
- Jack: *I have lost both my parents*
- Lady: Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.

(from the famous 'handbag' scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest*)

This is a conversation between two characters Lady Bracknell and Jack. Lady Bracknell asks, are your parents living? I have lost both of them.

Both? To lose one parent maybe be regarded as a misfortune to lose both looks like carelessness. So this kind of humour which even bordered on a dark humour and a lot of irony and even some kind of a comic cruelty in was immensely popular and it he and Wilde in that sense continues to be one of the most quoted humorous and satires even in the contemporary.

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- A humiliating end to his career – sentenced to two years' hard labour for homosexual offences (made illegal in 1885)
- The dichotomy between the elegant social witticisms and the seeming frivolity of the comic plots, and the shame and scandal of Wilde's private life – almost emblematic of the whole **crisis of Victorian morals**
- *The Picture of Dorian Gray, Teleny*
- *The Truth of masks, The Soul of Man Under Socialism*
 - probe behind the Victorian façade into the details and implications of some of the standard **hypocrisies** of the age

In spite of the immense success and popularity that Wilde enjoyed we find him moving towards a very tragic end.

He had a very humiliating end to his dramatic career he was sentenced to 2 years of hard labour for homosexual offenses. Homosexuality as a practise was made illegal in England in 1885, in the contrast between Wilde's plays and the kind of personal life that he led we can find some of the trades of Victorianism getting embodied as well. As some of the historians have pointed out the dichotomy between the elegant social witticisms and the seeming frivolity of the comic plots and the shame and scandal of Wilde's private life is almost emblematic of the whole crisis of the Victorian morals

So significantly even for certain writers who tried to stay away from some of the pressing concerns of the day and try to completely camouflage this concerns with wit and irony and humour we find even they are not able to stay away from the crisis of Victorian morals. The other important works by Wilde include *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Teleny* and he also wrote some non-fictional and non-dramatic works such as *The Truth of Masks* and *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*.

In this we find him engaging in a probe behind the Victorian facade into the details and implications of some of the standardised hypocrisies of the age.

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The other significant playwrights of the Victorian period include Arthur Wing Pinero who had written *The Squire* and *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* who had published *The Magistrate* he also like while engaged with a lot of themes of social scandal.

Douglas Jerrold was primarily a journalist he was associated with the periodicals *Athenaeum* and the *Punch* and his works *The Mutiny at the Nore*, *Martha Willis* and *The Factory Girl* were mostly melodramatic in nature they were not really successful in stage they did not find much success in print either but he was more a known an his influence was more significant in him being the founder of the *Dramatic Authors Society* in 1833 in this Society was to protect the interest of the playwrights and in that sense it also becomes one of the movements when politics and art crossover in order to embrace each other.

Henry Arthur Jones was a more committed dramatist than many of these minor other dramatist his important works were *The Liars*, *Mrs. Danes's Defence* we do not find him enjoying much popularity but however an analysis of his craft would proved to us he did have a the perfect dramatic genius.

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The other important Victorian playwrights whose works are not really discussed in literary histories are W E Henley, Tom Taylor and Thomas William Robertson. So with this we come to an end of this very brief session on the Victorian dramatist and as we noted at the beginning it is important to build in a lot of continuity into our discussion over literary histories which is why we focus even on lesser known authors and lesser known genres and also the non-representative events of every age. So with this we wrap up today's session thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.