

# FACTFILE:

## GCSE

### DRAMA

#### Component 3



## Knowledge and Understanding of Drama, Exploration of the Set Text

### Philadelphia, Here I Come

by Brian Friel

#### Social

- Emigration to America from rural working class Ireland increased after the Second World War. There is clear class division within the play and it is these class distinctions which added to Gar's final decision to leave Ireland and his middle class girlfriend who wanted to keep her status and marries a doctor;
- Ballybeg would have been very traditional with very limited entertainment for young people;
- Rural Ireland had limited technological or mechanical resources;
- Gar would have been regarded as working class and Kate, whose father was a Senator, would be regarded as middle class;
- Unemployment was high. Gar had been to university in Dublin but had returned home for employment and to his friends;
- Society was led by the church and state with moderation and strict codes of conduct encouraged;
- The play reflects the structure of society during this period with the Parish Priest, local schoolmaster and councillor all living in Ballybeg.

#### Cultural

- The cultural context is heavily dominated by the male/female role and the divide in responsibilities within a repressed and often closed society. The women play typically female roles with Madge mothering and keeping the house and Kate obeying her father and marrying young;
- Tradition, religion, and family life are reflected in the play;
- There was a generational divide in rural Ireland in the 60's between youth and traditions of the older generation;
- The cultural attitude of stoicism and pride directly contrasts the popular culture of drinking alcohol, dancing and idolising cultural influences which were popular in America at this time;
- American music and television popularised teen and youth culture and musical genres such as rock had a world-wide appeal, making America seem the ideal dream or escape for many young people;
- Emphasis was on the family unit and religion was at the centre of family life during this period and SB and Madge continue the ritual of saying the rosary every night,

## Historical

- Brian Friel wrote *Philadelphia, Here I Come* after spending some time in The Guthrie Theatre in America in the 1950's and it was first staged at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, in 1964, as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival;
- The play opened in the West End, London, in 1966 and following this in New York;
- Friel set the play in 1964 in a fictional village, Ballybeg (Baile Beag, translated as small town) and filled it with loved and recognised Irish stereotypes and clichéd characters of the 60's in rural Ireland;
- Aer Lingus introduced transatlantic flights from Dublin to New York in 1958 and emigration to America was very popular at this time;
- Mail was still being delivered by van to Donegal villages;
- Roads had improved and people were much more mobile and could travel to get their groceries;
- The priesthood and teaching were very respected professions in Ireland at this time;
- The corner shop, in a small village such as Ballybeg, sold all household needs and was a meeting place for the locals but supermarkets were now being opened in Donegal.

## Theatrical Conventions

- The play was first performed on a proscenium arch stage and is generally suited to this staging or an open staging convention;
- Friel refused the 'fourth wall' convention and set the play in the kitchen, in keeping with 1950's kitchen sink drama;
- The play has multi-locations including a scullery, Gar's bedroom and other outdoor non-specified locations;
- Friel provides extensive stage directions and even specific music as he wants to achieve naturalism, despite the fact that he uses non-naturalistic dramatic techniques such as Flashback and stream of consciousness;
- The action takes place in the protagonist's mind. It is a dramatic technique that allows the audience to connect with the character on an emotional level;
- The use of dual characterisation and the alter-ego for the central character Gar, was a new technique for Irish theatre;
- What was revolutionary about Philadelphia in 1964 was that it dispensed with plot and concentrated on personal situation and social conditions of the time.

## Form and Style

- The play is set in Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland. It was written to be performed in the period in which it was written, the early 1960's;
- Friel is very descriptive about the setting, in particular, describing a bachelor's kitchen and bedroom;
- The play is a tragi-comedy set in two episodes, with the second episode being darker in mood than the first. The first episode is upbeat and features various flashbacks;
- The action takes place within the period of a few hours on the evening of Gar's departure for America. However, the flashbacks make the time period appear longer than it actually is;
- It is written as two episodes rather than in a conventional act or scene structure and the action is continuous;
- The play moves between the present and past to provide some context for Gar's decision to leave;
- Friel uses various theatrical devices, the most innovative being the use of 'Public' and 'Private' self. Private is the unseen, alter-ego and conscience;
- Many of the personal and tragic memories are played out through monologue, which creates further privacy and creates an intimate connection with the audience.

## Genre

- The play is a Tragi-comedy with comical moments, which is ultimately overshadowed by the quieter moments of reflection and the tragic moments which deal with self-exile, unrequited love, ignorance and lack of communication;
- One of the most tragic moments in the play is as a result of the problematic relationship Gar has with his father. The generational gap, different attitudes to life and tradition become apparent and create a wedge between father and son;
- The play is extremely realistic in terms of dialogue and naturalistic in setting. However, the playwright uses various devices such as flash-backs, stream-of-consciousness and monologue to create an interplay between realism, memory and fantasy;
- The play also contains certain comedic, almost melodramatic moments, with exaggerated fantasies and exuberant movement sequences.

## Language

- There are several words repeated throughout the play that infer important themes. One of the most common is the play on the word 'time', which subliminally suggests that Gar is running out of time and perhaps that time in Ballybeg moves so slowly;
- The nature of the language varies greatly as the play moves between fantasy, routine dialogue and memories. The language as spoken by Private tends to be unrefined, uncensored and therefore much more comical;
- Age, background and environmental factors influence the language used to represent the characters. For example, Lizzy has a pseudo-Irish-American way of speaking and uses terms such as 'honey';
- The language is powerful and dramatic at times, but it is also poetic and rustic, representing the Irish inclination to use verse, poetry and clichés;
- The language is colourful and vibrant and rich both in content and meaning;
- Friel uses local dialectical terms such as 'tethered', 'skinflint' and 'scullery.' This reflects the richness of the languages as well as enhancing the realism.

## Structure

- The play contains three episodes, but unusually does not seem to work towards a climax or conclusion;
- There are two short intervals between the episodes with a 'quick curtain' being used between each episode but this may change with one interval being a more popular option;
- There are fourteen characters in the play and Private is not seen by the other characters on stage;
- The Father-son relationship dominates the first episode. However, there is also a flashback to Gar's interactions with Kate. Episode three sees the return to nostalgia and reflection;
- A front stage curtain and blackout are used in the play;
- In the end, we are not quite sure whether Gar leaves for America.

