

FACTFILE:

GCSE

DRAMA

Component 3



Knowledge and Understanding of Drama, Exploration of the Set Text

Tea in a China Cup

by Christina Reid

Social

- The play was first performed in 1972 at the height of 'The Troubles.' During this period, Belfast was a dangerous place to live. It was extremely divided in terms of political viewpoint and there was a religious divide;
- Many Protestants whose family were in the forces or serving officers of the law feared returning to Northern Ireland or becoming a target. This is featured in Sammy's reluctance to return home to Northern Ireland as a serving soldier;
- The play focuses upon the unlikely friendship between two working class girls from different religious traditions. Theresa is encouraged to get an education at any cost, whereas Beth, a Protestant, cannot go to a grammar school despite being smart enough because her parents cannot afford the uniform and are too proud to ask for a 'hand out';
- Reid identifies the stereotypical prejudices that existed. However, she also shows the social similarities such as pride in tradition and culture.

Cultural

- In Northern Ireland at this time, women were at the centre of the family and made all the important decisions about the family. They became resourceful due to the absence of males who were either way fighting wars, working long hours or drinking in the local public houses;
- Reid infers that there was a strong work ethic amongst working class Protestants;
- In working class areas there was a distinct culture of pride as well as respectability;
- In lower class Protestant areas, people distrusted their Catholic neighbours. This was the culture of a divided Northern Ireland at this time; false preconceptions were fostered regarding 'the other side';
- There was a culture of morality and a religious ethos on both sides. This is represented in the play when Theresa is forced to cover up the child she had out of wed-lock and with Beth marrying a man she doubted to save face for her mother;
- Reid shows the generational attitude to 'keeping up appearances.' This is represented through the symbol of the china cabinet and the symbol of serving tea in a china cup;
- Music and especially 'The Twelfth of July' played a vital role in Protestant culture.

Historical

- The play was written by Christina Reid in the 1980's when she was the playwright in residence at the Lyric Theatre;
- The play was first performed in the Lyric Theatre, Belfast and it was directed by Leon Rubin in 1983 during 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland;
- Reid was brought up in a Protestant family by a single mother and therefore was writing about her own life at this time in Belfast;
- The play is set over a period of 40 years from 1939–1972. The play also refers to the picture of the grandfather in his First World War uniform and his son Samuel in his Second World War uniform;
- The play contains two acts, beginning in 1972 and flashing back to 1939 and forward to 1952. This spans the life of Sarah, the main protagonist's mother.

Theatrical Conventions

- The play was first performed on an open, end-on stage at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast;
- Told mainly from the women's point of view, the play is about memory and story-telling, with Beth acting as the central protagonist and narrator linking tales from past to present;
- The play focuses on rituals and traditions such as drinking tea, watching parades, storytelling and laying out the dead and therefore has a number of locations;
- Each Act contains several flashbacks, during which Beth re-experiences the past;
- Changes of lighting indicate changes of time and place.

Form and Style

- 'Tea in a China Cup' is set in Belfast and spans more than three decades in the life of a Protestant working class family;
- The play has fifteen characters, mainly female, and can be played by nine actors, six females and three males;
- The text is generally interactive natural dialogue of the period in inner-city Belfast;
- The play contains a series of monologues that allow the more private and internal thoughts of the characters to be revealed. These balance the more comedic exchanges in the dialogue;
- Beth is both the narrator and heroine of the play;
- The play contains both elements of comedy and tragedy; tracing the highs and lows of one Protestant family through two wars and the 'Troubles';
- It was written primarily for a female audience.

Genre

- The play is often called a 'Memory play,' in which the central character re-experiences life through flashbacks and storytelling;
- Despite the various unrealistic devices used, there is a naturalism in the design expectation and the dialogue used to dramatize the lives of ordinary people, their personal problems as well as their social and material environment;
- The Play contains a mixture of comedy and tragedy with elements of sardonic humour throughout and ultimately it ends on a tragic note with Beth finding her mother dead and having to sell her house and say goodbye to her marriage;
- The stories are often funny, painful and disturbing but generally realistic, revealing the pain and hardship that the working class families endured through two world wars and the 'Troubles'.

Language

- The language is dialectal and contains many colloquialisms which helps the audience to connect with the characters and situations presented;
- The language style changes over the span of the thirty-year period;
- The dialogue is working class inner-city Belfast. The army officer is English and the Clerk may be slightly more refined in her formal language;
- The play is full of Belfast clichés about both Protestants and Catholics which add humour and realism especially in the scenes with Beth and Theresa;
- The language is used to evoke emotion as well as having a comedic effect;
- Beth is the strong narrative voice throughout. Her dialogue reveals that her words are not often her own, 'my head is full of other people's memories'.

Structure

- The play contains two Acts. Act one begins in 1972 as Beth's mum is dying. There are then flashbacks, linking 1972 and 1939 to 1952, the common link between the time periods is the discussion about 'the sound of an 'Orange band';
- Act one introduces the characters and generations of stoical Ulster women;
- Act two is darker with rioting, fear and the death of Mr Jamison and Sarah;
- The interval should come between the two acts which each last about an hour and contain a number of short episodic scenes;
- The scenes are set in different locations around the stage and lighting changes such as blackouts and cross-fades are used to divide these scenes;
- A front-stage curtain is not required for the play.

