

Sophister Module Description Template 2026-27

Full Name: Modern Drama and the Play of Ideas

Short Name: Modern Drama

Lecturer Name(s) and Email Address(es): Nicholas Grene ngrene@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester: HT

Year: SS

Module Content:

Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*; Bernard Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island*; Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*; Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*; Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; Vaclav Havel, *Temptation*; Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*; Suzan Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*; Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*; Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this module students will be able to:

- Show knowledge of the varying forms of the play of ideas in the modern period
- Assess the nature of the ideas debated in the plays studied
- Analyse the effects of the theatrical strategies adopted by the playwright
- Apply the skills developed in this module to the reading of other plays

Learning Aims:

The aim of this module is to explore the play of ideas from the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. Modernism produced radical formal changes in the theatre as in all the other arts. Shaw argued that in this Ibsen was a key innovator, substituting a final discussion for the traditional melodramatic catastrophe. In his own plays, Shaw followed Ibsen's lead in making ideas as much as action the driver for drama. The play of ideas in the modern period has combined experimental theatrical form with challenging audience attitudes. So, for example, the metadrama of Pirandello, which reconceived the relation between theatrical performance and reality, is taken in a very different direction by Wilder and Beckett, with his uninterpretable theatrical situations, called in question the relation between image and meaning. In Brecht and Havel, the dynamics of power and politics are expressed through fable and myth. Churchill and Parks used fantastic and grotesque styles to dramatize issues of gender, class and race. Frayn and Stoppard collapsed time and memory in their exploration of scientific progress. The play of ideas can be interpreted not just as a single dramatic form but the free play of form and meaning that characterizes so much of modern drama.

Apart from background introductions to each text, the module will be taught entirely through seminar discussion on the basis of themes and suggested reading posted in advance on Blackboard.

Assessment Details:

2 essays

Short essay of 1500 words, longer essay of 4500 words

35%/65%

Preliminary Reading List:

Apart from the individual plays listed above (most of which are available online) there are a few books providing background and context:

Brad Kent and David Kornhaber (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025)

Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

J.J. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

Please note:

- Curricular information is subject to change.
- Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.