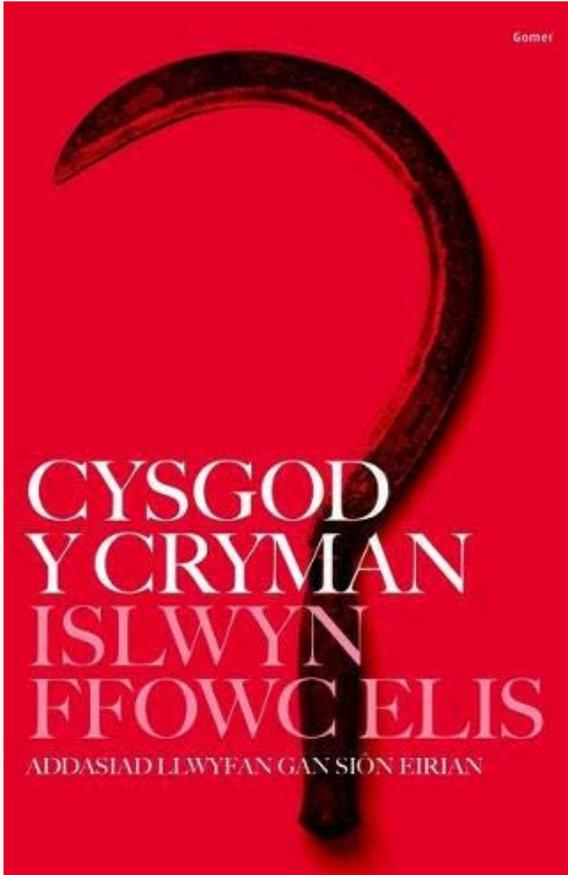




wjec
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GCSE Drama
Shadow of the Sickle
by
Islwyn Ffowc Elis





Historical background

The novel "*Cysgod y Cryman*" by Islwyn Ffowc Elis (later translated into English by Meic Stephens and published under the title *Shadow of the Sickle*) was first published in 1953. It became a bestseller and was considered an important milestone in the history of the Welsh novel. It was first adapted for television and this stage adaptation by Sion Eirian (who had already written an English adaptation for radio in 2002). The novel is set immediately after the Second World War, a time of great change not just for Wales but for the whole world - and this is clearly reflected throughout.

Original Staging Conditions

- It was first performed between January and March 2007 by *Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru*.
- It was a touring production and opened in *Theatr Gwynedd*, Bangor. The original acting area was a Proscenium Arch.



- The director of the original production of *Cysgod y Cryman* was Cefin Roberts.
- Because of the many different locations, *Shadow of the Sickle* is a very challenging play to stage. The locations vary, including kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms, in two farms, Lleifior and Trawscoed, outdoor scenes, a tavern bar and the Union at Bangor University. The designer for the original production was Martin Morley and in his design, he settled for a revolving stage with a stepped spiral ramp. It was quick to install and was completely silent. Upstage was suspended a large projection screen onto which were shown location scenes.



- Set and props were naturalistic, reflecting the period in which the play is set -1949/1950.



- Costumes were naturalistic, reflecting both the time period and status of the characters.



- Sound effects were naturalistic to create location, e.g. the farm. Music and songs used were the ones stated in the play to create a sense of period, location and atmosphere.

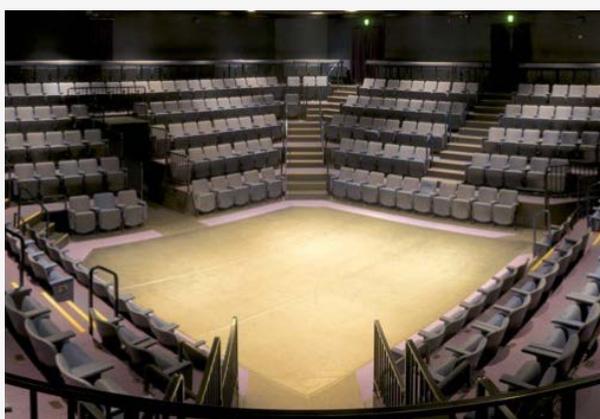
Task

Cefin Roberts, the original director of *Cysgod y Cryman*, commented

“Possibly, if I was to direct the script again in the future I would be inclined to go for a simpler set and make more use of lighting and sound.”

Look at the 4 images below of different types of acting areas.

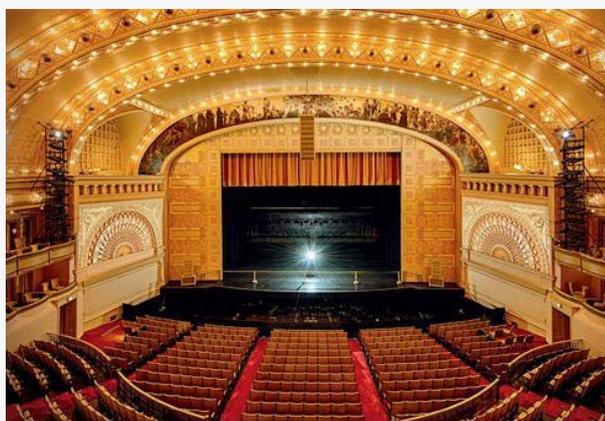
i) Theatre in the Round



iii) Traverse Stage



ii) Proscenium Arch Stage



iv) Thrust Stage



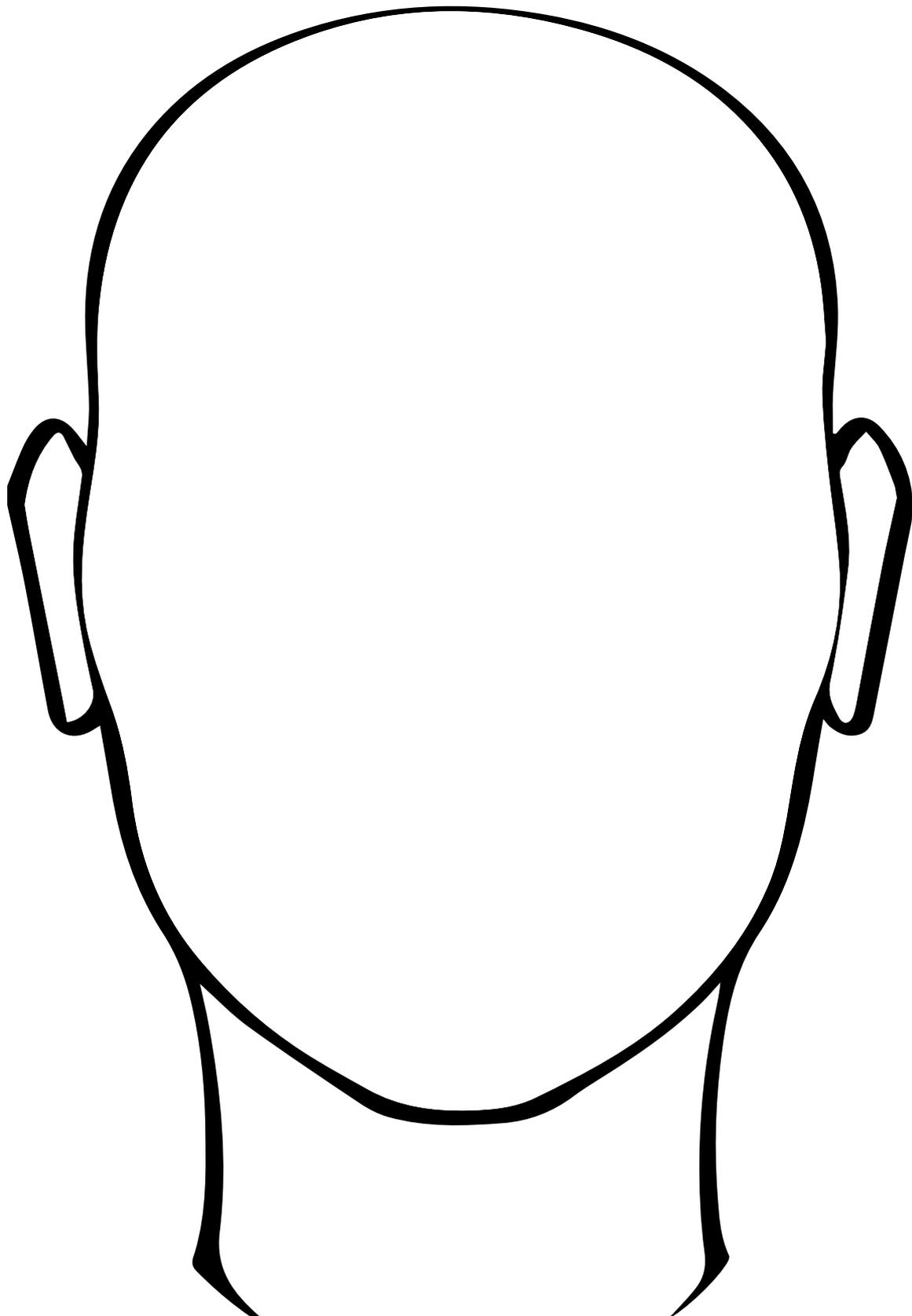
- With a partner, look at picture (i) Theatre in the Round. Explain how you create the location for scene 2, "*a room in Union building*", using set and props. Consider the style you think would be appropriate for this type of stage, the set and props, and colour and fabric you would use to create atmosphere.
- With a partner, look at picture (iv) Thrust Stage. Explain how you would create the location for scene 1 using lighting. Consider the style you think would be appropriate, the lighting effects you would use and the use of colour to create atmosphere.
- Choose one acting area which you think would be most appropriate in staging a contemporary production of *Shadow of the Sickle*. Explain your choices, giving 3 **specific** examples why you think it would be effective.
- Choose one acting area which you think would be least appropriate in staging a contemporary production of *Shadow of the Sickle*. Explain your choices, giving 3 **specific** examples why you think it wouldn't be effective.
- With a partner, look at picture (ii) Proscenium Arch Stage. Explain how you create the location for **the scene** between Harri and Edward (p55-57) using a naturalistic set.

Task

- i) In groups of 4, record a soundscape which could be used for the scene between Gwylan and Harri (p 23-26). Decide at which points it would be played. Write a cue sheet showing where it would be faded in/out, the volume etc. to help create atmosphere, location and environment.
- ii) Music from the period features throughout the play to give a sense of location and to underscore some of the key themes.
Choose 2 scenes and make a list of the sound effects that could be used. Write a cue sheet showing where it would be faded in/out, the volume etc. to help create atmosphere, location and environment.
Choose a piece of contemporary music or a song which could be used for scene 2 in the Union. Explain the reasons for your choice.
- iii) Choose a piece of music or a song which could be used as Gwylan, Lisabeth and Marged's "themes" and played at key moments when they appear. Explain the reasons for your choice.

Task

- a)
 - i) Using the template on the next page, design suitable stage makeup for the character of *Lisbeth*.



ii) Describe a suitable costume you would choose for the character of Gwylan.

Explain your choice, focusing on:

- the period in which you are setting your production
- the style of your production
- garments the character is wearing
- colour and fabric
- two details that make the costume unique for that character, e.g. a small brooch of a hammer and a sickle to show her allegiance to the Communist party.

Give two reasons for your choices.

Examples of costumes from the original production.



Synopsis

Harri Vaughan is the son of Edward Vaughan, a wealthy estate owner (Lleifior farm) and a leader in the community. Harri is a student at Bangor University and there, under the influence of Gwylan Thomas, he becomes a communist and an atheist and it is this that leads to a long conflict between him and his father. It also has an impact on the rest of his family, his friends and his community, and one person in particular, his fiancée, Lisabeth Pugh. Thus, the significance of the title, *Shadow of the Sickle* – the sickle being the symbol of communism. His new ideas and beliefs throw a shadow over the people around him.

The period of the play is 1949/50 and its locations switches between Powys and Bangor.

Themes

Beliefs



Harri's decision to question the beliefs he has been brought up with and to which his family has always adhered to is the source of conflict within the play.

Although the theme of communism seems outdated by now, following the end of the Cold War and the downfall of the Berlin Wall, it remains relevant today. There are still examples of a person's ideas and

beliefs having an impact on those he loves and cherishes, be they ideas about religion, sex or politics.

Old versus New ideas

Edward embraces the old traditions of politics, religion and working methods. Harri wants to see change and experiment with new ideas. This causes tremendous frustration for both parties with each believing their way and ideas are the best. The end of the play indicates a compromise has been reached which allows both sides to stay true to their ideas whilst also accepting the other side. Again, this theme is still relevant to contemporary audiences in an ever-evolving world and the message of the play clearly shows there is room for both tradition and new ideas.

Family and Identity

As a well-established family in the area, Edward's reputation is important to him. Harri's rebellion and especially his breaking off the engagement to Lisabeth, challenges this. Harri is initially attracted to Gwylan because she is very different and has a clear sense of identity, although this is challenged as the relationship develops. Harri, although he loves his family dearly, is desperate to be true to his ideals and beliefs. Once again, the firm foundations of a loving family allows a compromise to be reached by the end of the play.

Prejudice



with regard to class and characters' preconceived ideas.

The Role of Women

Each of the women within the play is given a very definite identity. Gwylan represents the "new" woman, liberated and freethinking and Margaret the dutiful, traditional wife. Consider whether all the women within the play are simply stereotypes or whether there is a greater depth and psychological to each of them.

The play focuses on the period immediately after the Second World War and our hostilities with Germany – the play uses the character of Karl to focus on this. However, there are examples of prejudice

Task

- a)
 - i) Working with a partner, compile a list of scenes where the theme of **Old versus New ideas** is highlighted.
 - ii) As a class, prepare a list of questions based on your research in (i). Using the rehearsal technique of **hotseating**, question the characters of
 - Harri
 - Edward
 - Gwylan
 - Margaretabout their own beliefs and ideas and what they think of each other's and the effect they will have on an evolving society.
- b) As a set designer, compile a mood board based on the various **beliefs** highlighted throughout the play.
- c)
 - i) Working with a partner, choose a scene which illustrates the theme of **Family and Identity**. Compile a list of sound effects and music you would use to highlight this theme. Explain at which points you would use them to help create atmosphere and help underline the theme.

- ii) Using the same scene, compile a list of images which could be used as projections to highlight the theme of **Family and Identity** for a contemporary production in a studio space.
- d)
- i) With a partner, compile a **Role on the wall** for the following female characters:
 - Gwylan
 - Margaret
 - Lisabeth
 - Marged
 - Greta.
 - ii) Using your ideas, discuss what you think is the role of each woman within the play and which theme they are used to illustrate. Also explain whether you think they are simply a stereotype or a rounded three-dimensional character.

Style and structure of the play

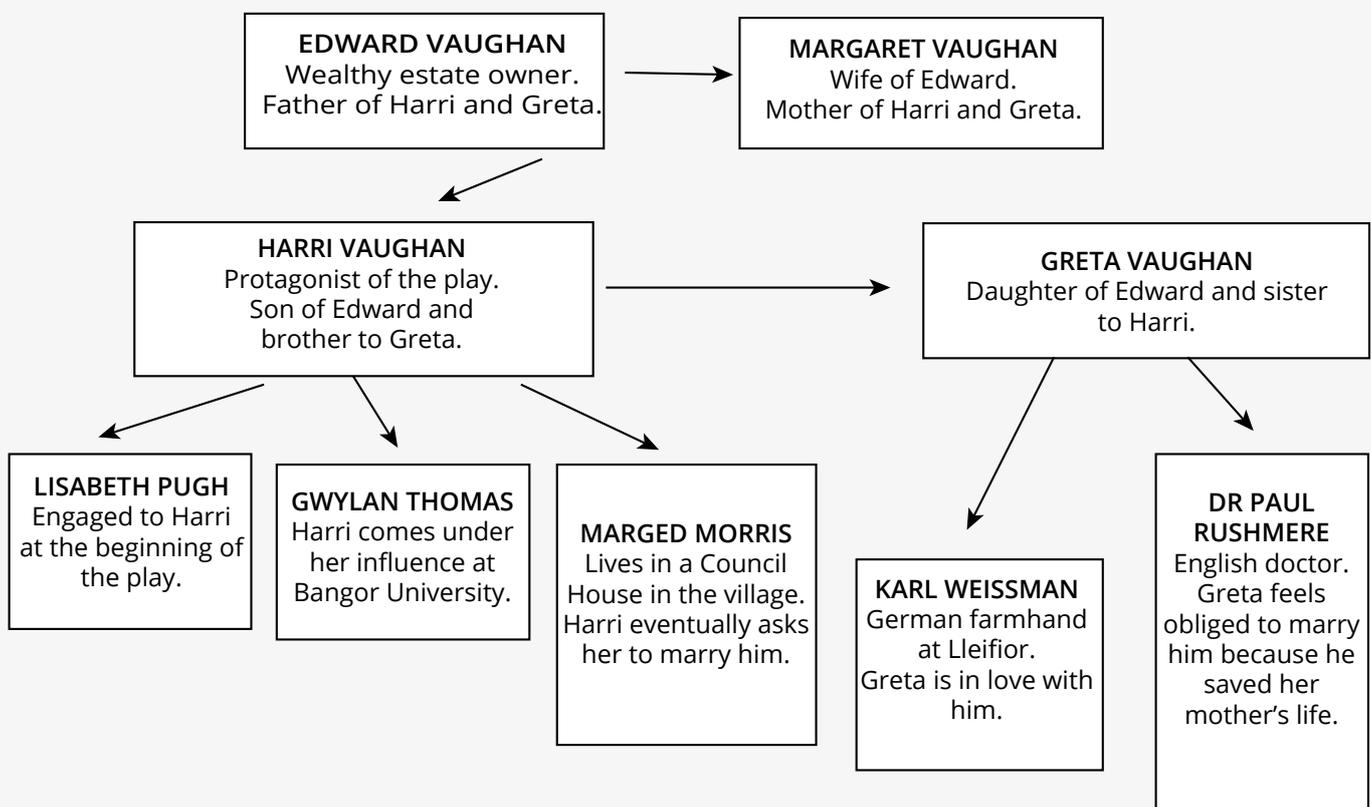
The characters and settings are both realistic in style. However, adapting the novel for the stage was never an easy task because there are so many different characters and so many different locations. The same problem will arise when we discuss the staging of the play. As a result, the play is episodic in its structure. There are two acts divided into 4 scenes each, but within those scenes there are various locations. Even though the original style is generally realistic, a contemporary staging might approach it in a more Brechtian manner to overcome some of the difficulties of staging it and to highlight the political issues for a modern-day audience.

Task

- a) Choose one *realistic* scene from the play and explain how you would adapt it to suit a *Brechtian* staging. Consider choice of stage, set, props, lighting, sound, costume and makeup.

The Characters

There are 23 characters in the play - many of them being minor roles. The main characters are as follows:





Some of the minor characters are Wil James, Terence, Robert Pugh, Eleanor Pugh and Gwdig John. In addition to these, there are nine other minor roles. This suggests multi-roling when it comes to staging the play. However, care must be taken when choosing which actors play more than one role. In the original production one criticism was that the actress playing Marged Morris (considered to be one of the more prominent characters) also played another character in another location.

Harri Vaughan

The central character in the play is a charismatic character and any actor playing this part must realise this. He is a character who has many deep feelings and an inner conflict. He is a complicated character with many aspects. He not only becomes a communist and an atheist, but he also rejects his fiancée, Lisabeth Pugh, starts an affair with Gwylan Thomas and eventually asks Marged Morris, who lives in a council house in the village, to marry him. Effective uses of voice and body movements are therefore essential to portray the character successfully. The actor must show, using these skills, Harri's determination to stick to his principles and not bow to the beliefs of his father. He is so determined to turn his back on his father's way of living that he decides to quit university and applies for a job as a labourer with the local council.

Edward Vaughan

Another strong character. He is a wealthy estate owner and an old style Liberal. The actor portraying this role should carefully consider his posture on stage - his body should convey a confident and authoritative figure. He cannot accept anyone going against his wishes and definitely not anyone disputing his ideas and beliefs. This is what his son Harri does in the play and the scenes between father and son are full of dramatic tension. The tension between the two can be seen in the first few pages of the play, e.g.

EDWARD - I want to see you maintaining the good name of the Vaughans. Respecting your ancestry.

HARRI - Do you think that a name is important, Dad?

EDWARD - It has been until now.

HARRI - Remember that things change so quickly in the busy world out there...

EDWARD - Places like Lleifior are indestructible. They give security to the people living around them...

We come to feel sorry for Edward Vaughan towards the end of the play, that is when he loses out to Aerwennydd Francis as district councillor. After he loses the vote, the stage direction describes his response: *Edward bows his head, as if his spirit sags under the disappointment of losing.*

Gwylan Thomas

A post-graduate student at Bangor University. She is a very forceful and determined character and under her influence Harri is first introduced to the ideas and beliefs of communism. When we first meet her in the play she presents Harri with a leaflet - "*The Fight for Socialism in Wales*" - and she refers to the manifesto of the Communist Party, anxious for him to read the Welsh translation. She also invites him to join her at the SocSoc

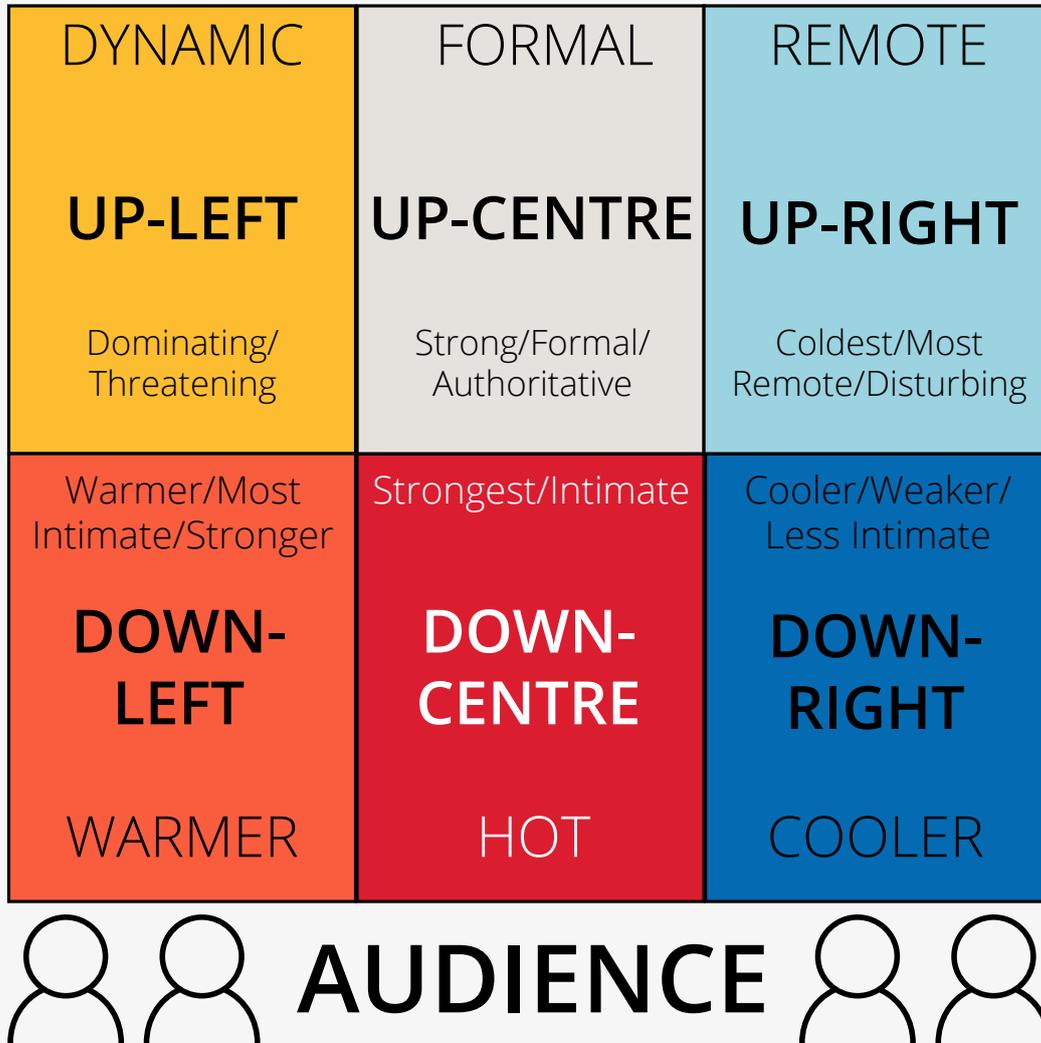
meeting later that day. She is fond of mocking Harri for his wealthy background. We see an example of this when she says *"Your personal valet is still with you"* when Harri's friend, Gwdig, joins them. She is very passionate about her cause. She is flirtatious and it is little wonder that Harri falls under her charms. She can be very persuasive, and it is she that persuades Harri not to go ahead and marry Lisabeth Pugh, the daughter of another wealthy estate owner, since this would mean turning his back on his socialist ideals. The part of Gwylan is very challenging for any actress because she would have to use effective vocal and movement skills to convey these different aspects of her character.

Wil James

Of the minor roles, Wil James is the most colourful character. He is a farmhand at Lleifior and it is obvious from the beginning that he is a rogue and a blaggard. He detests the fact that Karl Weissman, a German, is working alongside him and exploits every situation to mock and ridicule him for being German. Wil James is a 1940s example of a racist and today he would surely be at the forefront condemning immigration. He constantly refers to Karl as 'Jerry' and later in the play, he, along with his cronies, physically attack Karl as he is walking home to Lleifior. Karl is thrown to the ground and Wil kicks him more than once whilst he is down. It is not only Karl who suffers from Wil James' acid tongue. He mocks Harri as well for his University education. One day when Harri, home from college, joins them in the field, and his future father in law, Robert Pugh, arrives, Wil's comment is:
"Your father in law, Harri. Coming to keep an eye on you. To see how you can handle a pitchfork after three years in college."
The role of Wil James would be a joy for any actor to portray.

Task

- a) Look at the diagram below which explores the positioning of characters and the semiotics of that position:



- b) Look at the scene on pages 55-57. With a partner, practically explore where you would position Harri and Edward to explore the changing relationships and atmosphere within the scene.
- c) As a director, choose 2 rehearsal techniques you would use to explore the relationship between Harri and Edward within the scene.
- d) Look at Edward's speech (p56) With a partner, experiment performing it using different vocal expressions, e.g. angry, ominous, loud etc., tempo and volume. Compile a list of which vocal expressions are the most effective in conveying the mood of these lines to an audience.
- e) With a partner, improvise a scene between Harri and Gwylan, twenty years after the events within the play, when they meet up for a college reunion. Discuss where the scene

is set, the relationship between the characters, character motivation and the mood of each of the characters within the scene. Base your improvisation on events in the play.

- f) Create a digital “diary” for Gwylan. Take a photo of 10 items that she feels would be important in showing future generations her political beliefs whilst she was at university. Create a short video explaining why she selected the items and why she thinks they represent life at this time.
- g) Harri and Gwylan both act impulsively given the society they are part of. But what would have happened if they had thought their decisions through first? Choose a significant part of the play and create a conscience corridor for them. One student will play Harri and the rest of class will create a corridor, i.e. 2 lines facing each other. One side will advise caution, the other side will urge him to go with his feelings and ignore his family. Harri must walk down the corridor to seek advice. As he passes, each student must give advice. At the end, Harri must make a decision.
- h) The 5 main women in the play each has a different relationship with Harri. Write a monologue for each of the women focusing on your perspective of him.
- i) Create a “photo album” of 8 still images for the Vaughan family. Give each picture a title and span the “photos” from when Harri and Greta are young, right through to the “present”. Use positioning, gesture, facial expressions and posture to show the changing relationships within the family.

The staging of the play

A good starting point would be to ask students if the original stage set for *Cysgod y Cryman*, was too cumbersome and would a set like this hinder the actions of the players and slow the fluidity of the play? With so many different locations, would a more minimalistic set be more appropriate? Would the play work just as well on a bare stage using selective lighting to focus on the different locations, using a minimum of props and furniture? The director of the original production of *Cysgod y Cryman* was Cefin Roberts. This is what he had to say about the production.

"It's possible that Cysgod y Cryman (Shadow of the Sickle) is one of the most well-known of all Welsh novels. I remember reading it when I was very young, and it made quite an impression on me at the time. The major themes are all here: a love story, the gap between two generations, politics, to name only three.

Staging an adaptation of a novel is a challenge to any director since the backdrop of most novels is much wider than the usual play, and this is certainly true of Islwyn Ffowc Elis' great novel. To add to the challenge, a large percentage of the audience will already have a definite picture of the characters and locations, especially 'Lleifior' itself. Indeed, it could be argued that 'Lleifior' is the central character of the novel. Therefore, it's an impossible task for a director to please the whole audience.

Since Sion Eirian's adaptation adheres closely to the original plan of the novel the scenes change quickly from one location to another. I knew, as I approached the play as a director, that this would be an enormous challenge to Martin Morley, the set designer. He had to offer me possibilities to move

and place my characters in those locations without any hindrance; from the college to the home and from the farmyard to the corn fields, and even to Bangor pier. That is why he designed a set on a revolve. This enabled us to change furniture and props easily between each scene and another. For example: whilst actors were performing a scene in the living room of Lleifior it was possible for technicians to prepare the next scene on the other side of the set and then turn it to face the audience when the time came. But as anyone who has worked in the theatre knows it has its own difficulties. It can confine the acting space and it can create a headache for the lighting designer and slow down the technical running of the play since the technicians have one other element to add to their cues list. In addition, the cast had to get accustomed to working on a stage that moves!

It is possible, of course, to stage this kind of production on a simpler stage: projecting appropriate images on a backdrop to suggest a location; subtle lighting and appropriate props. I did not choose this option for my production for Theatr Genedlaethol Cymru since the company, at the time, had already staged a few productions in this style. Possibly, if I was to direct the script again in the future I would be inclined to go for a simpler set and make more use of lighting and sound. However, I do believe that the original design offered a spectacle that I wanted to give to the audience at the time."

Task

Choose 2 scenes and experiment how you would stage them using the following styles:

- Naturalism
- Expressionism
- Brechtian
- Minimalism/symbolism.

Consider:

- the acting area you would use for each style
- position of the audience
- set and props
- lighting and sound
- colour and fabric.

Explain, giving 3 specific reasons, which style you consider the most effective for a contemporary production of the play.