

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil

Teaching Notes and Discussion Questions for Higher English
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Rarely, if ever, has a play made such a powerful impression on Scottish audiences as did the 7:84 production of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* in 1973 when it was seen by over 300,000 people throughout Scotland and later by millions when it was broadcast as part of the BBC's *Play for Today* series. It presents the history of the Highlands from the Clearances, which made way for sheep and deer, to the oil boom of the 1970s, using an episodic Brechtian approach mingling documentation, commentary, sketches, music and song to dramatise an essentially folk view of events and hence its appropriate description as a 'ceilidh' play.

Here are some of the issues that you may want to look at as well as a few possible approaches with the text and the TV production (a video, or at least an audio recording of this is essential). In effect *The Cheviot ...* is two texts for the price of one!

Background

John McGrath's introduction offers a fascinating insight into the background, the writing, development and performance of the play on tour. Suggestions for further reading or research are included in the section entitled 'Further Assignments', but none of these are necessary to appreciate the play which tells its own version of the Clearances.

Viewpoint and Tone

By the end of this unit we should be ready to discuss the differences between art and propaganda, but to begin with we have to be clear about McGrath's viewpoint and how this affects his art and the tone of his work. Thus we have to consider the polemical nature of the play, and how successfully it convinces us of his viewpoint, how we react to it and how he treats

viewpoints different from his own (e.g., Highland landlords). We need to consider the art of the satirist and how he operates, especially in his use of irony and caricature, all of which will be examined later when we look at technique and style. In the meantime, look briefly at how he presents people he clearly disapproves of (landowners, factors, property developers and oil tycoons), and how their viewpoint is undercut by irony or ironic juxtaposition. The dialogue and songs of historical figures like Loch or Sellar, or caricatures like Lord Crask and Lady Phosphate or Texas Jim, are rich in irony but, in case we miss the point, they also spell out their real motives quite clearly: e.g. 'at double the price that you sold them to me'. How do we react to this kind of satire? Is it clever or crude, justified or unfair? Is he distorting the truth in any way?

RANGE:

- Higher English

KEY TEXTS:

- *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* (Methuen, 1981)

Themes

After viewing and reading the whole text and possibly doing some group drama work, one way of exploring the writer's main concerns might be for each group to take a number of issues to look at, and find out how these are presented and illustrated in the play. Themes could be grouped into (a) general; (b) different images of Scotland; (c) specific economic and political issues. Each class might prefer its own categories and its own ideas about what the main issues are. These should be discussed before starting, but here are some suggestions:

- (a) injustice, exploitation, greed, repression and brutality, corruption, hypocrisy, indifference, courage, tragedy and many more.
- (b) Jacobite, Romantic, music-hall and advertising stereotypes, tourist images, the quaint and the nostalgic, realistic images of poverty, repression, decline, rebellion and resistance, or the presentation of actual historical events and people.
- (c) the social and economic reasons for the Clearances and the creation of sheep farms and sporting estates; the rights and wrongs of land ownership and land use, absentee landlords, evictions, emigration, or soldiering; the power of multi-national companies, developers, speculators and 'white settlers'; the effect of the oil boom, alternative employment, the presence of military bases and installations, pollution, etc. (e.g., as well as oil we now have other problems in the North Sea and possibly the problems of nuclear waste). Not all of these are specified in the play, but they are closely related to issues which are.

Style, Structure and Technique

Although it mingles political argument and entertainment in Brechtian fashion, the play adopts the traditional ceilidh form to this end in a very original fashion (see Introduction, p. x). It begins and ends with music and singing (usually followed with a dance) and in between tells stories, puts forward arguments and presents sketches using satire, caricature, parody and pantomime.

The play develops in three broad stages dealing with the **Cheviot** (pp. 1–37); the **Stag** (pp. 37–57); and the **Oil** (pp. 57–end). Each of these stages is subdivided into particular scenes or episodes which illustrate the theme. Each group could examine at least one of these episodes to establish:

1. what techniques are used, what exactly they contribute to each scene and how one technique relates to another;

2. whether documentation/argument or entertainment predominate and how far they are in conflict or reinforce each other (i.e. are effectively integrated).

Using individual or group work, examine

3. the language of the narration OR commentary to see how far the writer's viewpoint affects the structure, word choice, imagery and tone and other linguistic features noticeable in any one particular section;
4. how far McGrath succeeds in avoiding boredom OR lecturing in these parts;
5. after each group has reported back, discussion concerning methods used to hold together the three main sections of the play, for example, recurring themes, techniques OR characters;
6. finally, explain the relationship of the cheviot, the stag and the oil to each other and to events outside Scotland. Which techniques do you think play the major role in establishing this relationship?

The Songs

A large part of the play's success was clearly due to the quality of the music and songs. These can be grouped into three main types:

- (a) Gaelic songs of great emotional power and intensity as well as the Gaelic poems.
 - (b) Songs of rebellion and protest adapted from Scottish folk songs such as 'The Battle of the Braes' (p. 35) or 'I will go' (p. 54).
 - (c) Satirical songs, clever ironic parodies which ridicule the 'villains' such as 'The Rain on the Hillside' (p. 8–9) and 'The Ruling Class' (pp. 41–43).
1. Explain the thoughts or feelings expressed in one song from each category and what exactly it is attacking, protesting against, celebrating or lamenting.
 2. Consider the position of these three songs in the structure of the play, how they tie in with the documentation or dialogue OR how they help to create mood or atmosphere and contribute to the recurring themes of the work as a whole.
 3. Examine the main features of versification, language, structure and tone in any one song.
 4. Consider the effectiveness of the tunes used as well as the instruments and sounds used (or absence of them). What qualities do these tunes have and how appropriate or ironic are they?

5. Creative writing. Use a well-known tune and write a parody or protest song about school or something topical.

Drama Work

Each group chooses a small section or scene to perform, record or video. It might be better to tackle this fairly early on after reading the play or to devote a set number of periods to it in the middle of the work, rather than leaving it to the end. Some suggestions: Loch and Sellar, the Minister, Sellar's trial, the Grousemoor, Red River Valley, Battle of the Braes, McChuckemup and Lord Vat, the new ruling class, Texas Jim, Lord of the Oil, Crofter and Wife.

Ideally groups should work on the extracts they choose in the section entitled 'Style, Structure and Technique' and they should feel free to adapt the script, or add to it or alter the tunes to suit themselves.

Media Studies and the TV Production

1. General discussion of how the TV version differs from the stage script. What hasn't been included and what has been added? What has been gained or lost in doing so? Would it have been possible simply to film the original stage version? Would this have worked on TV?
2. What is gained or lost by continually switching from the stage performance in Dornie village hall to documentary report or historical reconstruction and to audience shots? Does this detract from or enhance the TV play?
3. Compare the narrative structure of both. What is similar and what is different? Does this alter our focus on anything or affect continuity? There are many circles within circles in the TV production, as regards both technique and theme, for example, the use of time and the documentary within a documentary.
4. Examine some of the TV techniques used, e.g.,
 - (i) Panoramic landscape shots
 - (ii) Cutting quickly from one shot to another to create effect. Is this only a distraction which spoils the continuity, or do the cut shots reinforce each other? Do they extend the scope of the play in any way?
 - (iii) Filmed reconstruction of historical scenes. Why have these particular scenes been chosen? What effective dramatic devices are used in these scenes? How do these scenes create a strong emotional appeal? Account for the visual and sound element as well as songs and narration. In what ways has the stage narration been retained, apart from filming the actors reading it? What additional dimension is added to these scenes by the use of the analytic commentary from the play? How effectively are songs used in these scenes?
- (iv) Oil narration and commentary focusing on contemporary issues plays a large part in the last section. Do the interviews detract from or add to the point of the play? How does the documentary about the oil boom also maintain links with the cheviot and the stag?
- (v) The TV play focuses a lot on the audience and on how they are reacting to or being affected by the performance. Why do you think this has been done and what effect is created by it?
5. Looking more closely at particular sections:
 - (i) The introduction, which is a sort of TV prologue or overture, as it shows all the main elements of the drama to follow. How does it achieve this? Examine the effects achieved by the opening sequence which moves from a satellite shot of Earth to a Scottish castle and loch and finally village hall and performance.
 - (ii) The ending with its blend of oil shots, commentary, audience and performers, marching feet and the song. Why does the TV version choose to conclude the play with these non-textual images and ideas?
6. Examine the different representations of Scotland shown both in the film of the performance and the TV documentary. Does the film add additional elements to the stage play? Pay particular attention to how the ideas of community and solidarity are represented and how we focus on the positive aspects of community values and culture. Why do we focus on the audience and their relationship with the performance so much?
7. The roles of women in the Clearances and in the community are highlighted in both the play and film. Identify some of the ways this is done and consider how successful you think they are. Which are positive and which are negative representations? Why is this?

Further Assignments

1. Research for Discursive Essay and Talk

Using some of the following texts plus your own online research, prepare an essay or talk on the Highland Clearances as a whole or on some particular aspect or particular incident:

- John McGrath's introduction to the Methuen edition of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil*
- *Gloomy Memories* by Donald MacLeod (1857)

- *The Trial of Patrick Sellar* by Ian Grimble (1962)
- *The Highland Clearances* by John Prebble (1963)
- An Comunn Gaidhealach pamphlet No. 25 (1971)
- *The Making of the Crofting Community* by James Hunter (published 1976 by John Donald, revised 2000) and more recent works by the same author on the Highlands, emigration and land reform etc.
- *The Sunday Mail Story of Scotland* No. 31
- *The Poor Had No Lawyers* by Andy Wightman, (2011)
- Highland Region produced a unit on *The Cheviot ...* for Standard Grade, which contained a good essay and newspaper items. This may still be available in some schools in the Highlands.
- Novels on the Clearances such as *Butcher's Broom* or *The Silver Darlings* by Neil Gunn, *And the Cock Crew* by Fionn MacColla and *Consider the Lilies* by Iain Crichton Smith.

2. Report or Discursive Writing

- (a) Using some of the documentation from the play, write a balanced news item on the incident(s). Alternatively, you could write an account from the point of view of the government of the time, or of the landowners – or all three!
- (b) Using the play and your own research, write an essay on how the Highlands were affected by the Clearances and why it is important we do not forget this or on who or what was responsible.
- (c) Alternatively, do some research on the state of Scotland today or in your own area to prepare an essay/talk on 'My Scotland' or about what changes you'd like to see to create a better Scotland.

3. Creative Writing

- (a) Use one of the incidents, themes or songs from the play to write an imaginative or personal piece of prose or poetry, for example, putting yourself in the shoes of one of the participants or recalling your childhood memories of your parents being evicted.
- (b) Try writing a satirical sketch or song about some aspect of Scottish life today of which you disapprove.
- (c) One of the characters in the play arrives in heaven or hell. Script the scene where he or she appears before God or the Devil to justify their actions or persuade them that they have arrived in the wrong place.

(e) Literature Essays:

- (i) McGrath has said that his aim with 7:84 was 'to present to people specific facts about their lives or facts that affect their lives...to act as a mediator between people and a chunk of their. present history'. How far do you think he succeeds with *The Cheviot ...* in this aim? Do you think he has produced a work of art or a work of propaganda in doing so?
- (ii) Another of McGrath's stated aims was to 'present alternative ways of doing things' to his audience. Do you find *The Cheviot ...* persuades you that alternatives are necessary and that they may be possible? Does it, in your opinion, offer a pessimistic or optimistic view of Scotland? Why is this?
- (iii) *The Cheviot ...* shows us that the events and lessons of the past are extremely relevant to us today. Write in support of or against this statement.

Sample Exam Question

Look at the extract from the top of p. 48, where the academic enters, to the foot of p. 51, 'won't understand a word of it'.

1. How do the roles of the academic and the MCs complement each other in this extract? (2)
2. What is McGrath satirising via the figure of Andy McChuckemup and what techniques does the author use to make his satire effective? (3)
3. How does the presentation of Lord Vat develop the argument and what is the effect of bringing these two comic caricatures together to do business? (3)
4. How do the Gaelic song and the final MC comment help to round off this extract? (2)
5. Discuss some of the dramatic techniques used in this scene that you think contribute to the success of the play as a whole. (10)

Total = 20