

Do you agree that
Yeats creates a scene
of tragic intensity in
Purgatory?



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Do you agree that Yeats creates a scene of tragic intensity in *Purgatory*, or is the play too short and the characters too thinly evinced for this to be the case? The play *Purgatory* was written in 1938 by Yeats as a single-scene play revolving around the idea of tragic intensity. Yeats was a philosophical writer, choosing meaningful subject matters to discuss in his work. In this case, he chose to symbolise the destruction of Ireland created by the controversy of religion after being inspired by other plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and using the definitions set out by Aristotle after he studied the elements that made up a great tragedy.

In order to create a successful tragedy, Yeats used the Aristotelian unities: time, action and place. The timing of the play ensures a strong plausibility as the action is all dealt with in real-time, therefore reducing the imagination needed on behalf of the audience increasing the plausibility. The setting throughout the play is in a confined place upon the stage with very few changes made, allowing little release of tension. This intimate setting forces closeness between the characters and audience: though it finishes with the Old Man abandoning the scene leaving it desolate.

The complexity of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, there are more precise actions and plot in *Purgatory*, making it easier to understand, and allowing the seemingly simple plot to have all attention on it, resulting in a claustrophobic and tense atmosphere. In *Purgatory* there are only two characters for the audience to focus on, which provides enough space and time in his play to create characters that are evinced clearly enough to serve their purpose as model examples of an old and a young boy, which provides the plot with a deeper impact.

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Due to the relationship between the father and son, there is intensity between the characters as they should share a close bond and yet they both ignore and insult each other with snide remarks such as " silly old man. " Yet, the characters do share an attempted intimacy as the Old Man retells his painful and distressing story in the form of a monologue that is interrupted by the Boy. The Boy is ignored and this increases the drama and emphasizes the communication difficulties between the characters.

Although Yeats characterises the Old Man and Boy to an extent, the lack of details reinforces the cold and detached elements of the play, and without names they are left unidentified to the audience and therefore could appear as symbolisations of anyone. Fear of the supernatural emerges from the fear of the unknown, and Yeats uses this idea to extend his tragic scene by presenting the ghosts as a misunderstood and mysterious element due to the Old Man not knowing how to prevent the ghosts from returning.

He also doesn't know how to deal with them, which can be seen in the way he attempts to communicate with his mother by shouting " Don't let him touch you! " despite knowing that she cannot hear him and he cannot interfere. Death is a foreboding unknown in everyone's life that most are afraid of, and in Purgatory Yeats uses this to foreshadow the Boy's death as he mentions " Now I am young and you are old. " This creates confusion and tension as it is unclear who will die. Although the ghosts' role in the play is limited, their presence is a constant reminder of past events, present actions and the future to come that all relates to death.

This tension and the compactness of the play help to increase the intensity as well as invoke fear in the audience, which contributes to the final catharsis. Yeats uses cyclical chronology within the play to illustrate the idea of time being a continual concept that cannot be stopped. It highlights the eternal nature of purgatory and expands the idea of the inevitability of the drama. Yeats' use of the hoof beats signals the reoccurring cycle, allowing the events to begin and for the audience, who cannot hear the noise, to question the sanity of the Old Man.

The simple lighting in the window, the props, stage effects and setting all help form the audience's perception of a void place, therefore a tragic location filled with intensity, as anything more flamboyant would detract from the tragedy and therefore reduce its strength by distracting the attention onto details that do not contribute. Purgatory effectively demonstrates tragic intensity due to the brevity of the drama. This ensures that the audience's focus is concentrated to such an extent on the plot that the drama becomes claustrophobic.

There is no scenic juxtaposition, underlying subplot or change in scenery, which exaggerates this overpowering atmosphere and prevents a release from the tragedy - instead, a build-up of tension is created. Visually, the play is very precise and concentrated, and the anxiety of the dialogue is maintained until the final moments of the play, due to Yeats using his characters to produce emotions of fear and terror in the audience. The amount of emotional fluctuations in the short play only heightens the intensity by creating an overwhelming scene which leaves the audience emotionally exhausted before culminating in catharsis.

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Props and setting are essential to the play as the relevance of the knife and money goes straight to the core of the plot. Because there are no distractions on the stage, tension is created due to the attention and detail and each prop's significance is more obvious and important. The "jack-knife" relates to a jackdaw - a species of birds that commit mercy killings amongst their flock, echoing the way the Old Man ends up stabbing his son, as it can be interpreted into the act of salvation of his mother. The setting too contains poignant features that are considerably tragic themselves.

The tree is a constant reminder of the destruction of the Old Man's family members as Yeats' use of symbolism makes it a representation of his family tree. The house shows the ruins of the family's livelihood and the fall of nobility, increasing the visual intensity seen upon the stage. It is also seen to represent a wider scale issue, the destruction of Ireland, and this symbolism shows the vast ruin of a country concentrated to a mere house. This is intensified as the tragedy is not reduced but shown on a small scale. Harold Bloom¹ criticized Purgatory by attacking Yeats, believing there is "confusion... in the play." Bloom found the ending of the play a mass of confusion rather than causing the surge of emotions that are evoked at the end of a tragedy. This brings up the debate as to whether Yeats created an intense piece of drama or just a bewildering fifteen minute sketch. However, even if Purgatory is confusing due to the brevity, the mysterious plot can add to the overall tragedy, leaving the audience unsure of what they have witnessed, and fearful due to the rash actions of the Old Man and the presence of the paranormal.

In conclusion, Yeats creates a scene with brimming with tragic intensity by using the minimal props, time, characters and plot. The brevity of Purgatory ensures a 'scene of tragic intensity' due to the resulting starkness, claustrophobia and desolate tone. The horrifying drama concludes with an dark, empty set, which is how it had started, therefore presenting the cyclicity of purgatory on the stage for the audience to see. Yeats successfully moulded every aspect of tragedy at his disposal and created an intensely dramatic production.