

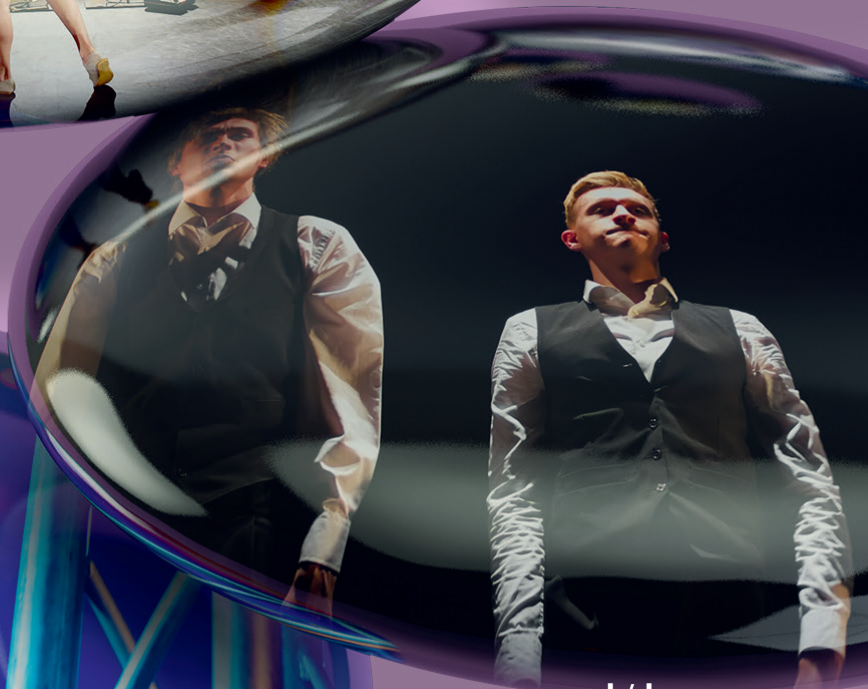
**GCSE (9–1)**  
*Teacher Guide*

# DRAMA

J316  
For first teaching in 2016

## Misterman – Enda Walsh

Version 1



# Misterman

by **Enda Walsh**

## Synopsis

*Misterman* tells the story of Thomas McGill, a marginalised member of a small community in a town called Inishfree. Surrounded by recordings of the other members of the town, highlighting their 'sins', we enter into Thomas' life, his routines and his quest to save those around him. As the plot unfolds, the audience are witness to Thomas re-telling or rather, re-making, the story of a very significant day through editing of the conversations he has with others on his tapes.

The play starts with Thomas frantically making his breakfast to the sound of Doris Day's 'Everybody Loves a Lover', until he becomes irritated with the noise and seeks to destroy the recorder it is playing on. This is the audience's first hint of violence and destruction in the play, but also introduces them to Thomas' world, full of pre-recorded sound and nothing else. His day appears to be a mission to recreate memories through these recordings and he skips forward and back on a few before finding the point in recorded conversations that he is looking for.

The first interaction of significance is with his 'mammy', a conversation between the live Thomas and a recorded voice of his mother. The audience soon learn that this is a rehearsed routine. He knows the nuances of the conversation, the timings of her responses versus his. As the scene progresses Thomas seemingly goes 'out' with his portable recorder where it brings to the stage for us the sounds of the outside world- though Thomas hasn't left his home.

Through these recordings we hear the interactions of our protagonist with a number of the members of his community: Mrs O'Leary complaining about the cold; Dwain Flynn spitting profanities; the pompous Mr McAnerny in his car and then onto Simple Eamon Moran who's steamy calendar forces Thomas to run away in anguish and in frustration and fear ends up killing a local dog. An exhausting start to Thomas' reconstruction which only intensifies as he enters Mrs Cleary's café and she wants him to dance with her. The witness of all of the town's 'sin' becomes too much for Thomas, but this seems to dissipate when he spots his 'angel'.

By the end of the play we find out this angel isn't an angel at all, but a cruel prank set up to tease Thomas. Speaking to the whole community at the local dance that evening he is bitter and maddened by the joke and plays the crowd a recording from his day; the murder of this young girl (Edel) as he smashes his tape recorder over her head repeatedly. The revelation and the shock of what he has done pushes Thomas back into his pretend world as he addresses the 'good angel' at his side. The reconstruction of his story is complete.



## Enda Walsh

Enda Walsh is a multi-award winning Irish playwright who had his breakthrough in 1996 with his play 'Disco Pigs'. He has had success as both a playwright and screenwriter writing multiple stage plays, screenplays and the musical 'Once', which won eight Tony Awards, a Grammy and two Laurence Olivier Awards. Walsh's work has been translated into over twenty different languages and performed all over the world. Recently Walsh has had success at The National Theatre in London not only with *Misterman* (2012) but also with 'Ballyturk' (2014), both starring popular Irish actor Cillian Murphy.

Although Walsh claims there is no conscious influence, it is said that his writing is reminiscent of Beckett and Pinter, especially the effect of 'real time' on stage.

## Genre and Context

The main genre of the text is a 'Social drama' with Walsh examining a small rural community and its occupants including the good and the bad. There are also issues surrounding mental illness explored in the play, as a result of isolation and potentially grief. The protagonist is at the centre of the world of the play and his mental state seems particularly linked to the effect of his detachment from others around him, as well as the effects of their reactions and responses towards him.

In addition, the text deals with religious obsession, again seen through the protagonist. Thomas' fervour and devotion seem to go hand in hand with his mental disintegration; as the pressure builds over the guilt of his own actions (the murder of Edel), the references to God intensify.

When approaching the exam students will need to have a clear understanding of the context of the play in relation to the above issues. The sample assessment materials (SAM) mark schemes on the OCR website are a good point of reference when exploring this as they offer an insight to what an examiner will expect the students to know and the connections students should be able to make. This understanding should be developed through research of mental illness in rural Ireland, the landscape in which Walsh wrote in and close analysis of the text, as well as their own practical explorations.



## Key Themes

### Solitude and mental illness

In the play Thomas is presented as a loner. Although we hear the voice of his mother and there is mention of his father at the start of the play, he has no real interactions with any other character aside from those heard in his recordings. Thomas seemingly lives alone in an abandoned factory and the opening stage directions suggest he has lived there for some time. This solitude and Thomas' marginalisation from the community offers perhaps some explanation for his unhinged behaviour, his obsessive routines and reliance on perfection as he edits his story through his recordings.

His solitude is further emphasised by fact that Thomas is the only character we ever see on stage. Anyone else is only ever heard through Thomas' recordings or his impersonations. The development of these impersonations builds to whole conversations being re-enacted between himself and the other characters. In performance this could be seen as slightly comical at first, but definitely brings into doubt his mental stability.

A consideration when approaching this particular issue is the representation of mental illness. There is potential for students to misinterpret this, or to ridicule Thomas' behaviours. Consider how research can support students in approaching the role.

### Religion

Thomas' desire to preach is apparent right at the start of the play where he describes how Earth was created by God. Here the stage directions mirror his words, lighting up the stage and Thomas' own world. We learn that he believes that evil has taken over the world and he feels it is his duty to watch over the people of Inishfree. As we progress through the play it appears that Thomas' recordings and note-taking are purposed for capturing the evils in those around him; evidence for some form of trial, or retribution perhaps. To Thomas, Mrs Cleary is 'indecent', Dwain Flynn has sinned for 'profanity' and he tells his cat, Trixie, that she needs to behave or she'll also 'end up in [his] notebook'.

Later in the play Thomas talks of an angel that has been sent to him that only he can see and talk to. This, however, is simply a trick by others in the village; a dare which has catastrophic consequences for both the girl involved, and for Thomas. By the end of the play the audience realise that his reworking and editing of this day, the highlighting of others' sins and his whole make-believe world, all seem to be in a search for blame to be shifted from himself for the ultimate sin he himself has committed.

## Staging the play

The play is set in a rural town in Ireland called Inishfree, but the primary location is Thomas' home in a disused warehouse. Considering the multiple locations Thomas visits in his reconstructions there is a need for a vast space on stage. The emotion of some of these 'conversations' suggest there is an energy and physicality to the central actors' performance, again suggesting that a de-cluttered and open space would be beneficial for performance.

In the original production the stage was split level, giving Thomas several spaces for the multiple locations in his story. The space is bleak and sparse, reflecting Thomas' simple needs but also giving the audience space to imagine his reconstructions.

Although students will need to have their own ideas for staging for the exam, they will also need to experiment with a variety of staging forms before coming to this conclusion. Simply looking at advantages and disadvantages of different types of stage and staging forms would be extremely useful, but practically exploration of these will help support students' understanding of the practicalities of the potential options open to a director.



## Approaching the exam

One of the most important preparations for the exam is the students' understanding of the whole text including the characters as well as plot developments. Working through the entire text practically will not only help to bring this to life for the students, but also help to engrain key moments, themes and directorial decisions into their memories for the exam.

As the exam asks the students to consider the play from the viewpoint of performers, designers and directors. This should be approached in the classroom through a range of explorations. Some suggestions, or starting points are listed below:

### *Space and blocking*

Could you use certain areas of the stage to represent each character or location in the recordings? How would the warehouse be set up to look lived in but equally a clear space for Thomas to inhabit the other locations in the play? How would you stage Thomas having conversations with his impersonations?

### *Character*

How would you introduce Thomas at the start of the play? Should we immediately see he is anxious and agitated about the events in his life or should this be revealed as the performance progresses? How do you create the impersonations? How do the recordings fit into your direction? How do you envisage Thomas' state of mind at the end of the play?

### *Design*

What staging form, or stage space would suit the play and why? What are their ideas for costume for Thomas? Would you use props or an element of costume as character indicators when he becomes other characters in the play?

As exam preparation it would be useful for students to document their explorations in a journal form. This might include character profiles and notes on the skills they have used to create these characters in rehearsal; sketches or photographs of blocking or staging ideas and observations of other students' successful work.

Lastly, consider opportunities beyond explorations and rehearsal such as a mini-showcase of sections of the text, or even (if you have time!) an entire performance changing actors as the plot progresses.

## Exam Questions

In order to be successful in exam responses students will need to:

- Have a clear understanding of the context of the play
- Have a clear understanding of the play's style and genre, and the indicators of these
- Have a developed use of drama terminology in their responses
- Be able to justify their responses through supported examples
- Have a clear vision of each character as well as design elements for performance
- Be able to approach their ideas from the perspective of a performer, designer and director.



## Suggested Activities

### Thomas McGill and the other characters of the play

*Misterman* is essentially one long monologue with intermittent recorded dialogue. The character of Thomas McGill is at the centre of the narrative, but we also learn a lot about a range of other characters through the recordings and Thomas' impersonations.

It is important your students explore the characters practically themselves and work in the role of director to develop skills in others. Although this may, at first, seem more challenging the students will have the added benefit of immediate feedback as they observe their ideas in rehearsal. When working through the full range of 'characters' in the play think about how clues from the text can support students' interpretations. Analysis of stage directions and Thomas' reaction to those around him, as well as their choice of dialogue are all important. It might also be useful to conduct a comparison of the recorded dialogue versus the dialogue created live by Thomas. Are there any differences? If so, why would that be?

### Thomas

Walsh's Thomas is an interesting and challenging role. Below are three descriptors of his personality and some suggestions about how to explore these traits in rehearsal with students. Activities such as these are useful to establish whole class decisions about the character before asking students to make individual choices regarding the nuances of performance.

#### *Obsessive*

Create a sequence of movement that can easily be looped or repeated around a mundane, everyday task. This could be something like making breakfast or putting on a shirt. Consider how the sequence could become a ritual, or routine that must be followed. Once this is established experiment with how this routine could be performed. Does the character get quicker as they find comfort in the familiarity of the routine? Does the character get more agitated or frustrated with a section that doesn't always go exactly as imagined? Ask the students to share their routines and discuss how this might link to Thomas in the play.

Either through mime, or with an object that could represent a tape player, improvise how Thomas might interact with his tapes and recording equipment. Consider why these are important, precious even, to him and how this can be communicated through performance.

Again, ask the students to share their improvisations and comment on how the significance of the tapes and/or the recording device has been demonstrated.

#### *Marginalised*

Create a whole class improvisation of the inhabitants of Inishfree talking busily with one another. Into the improvisation cast one student as Thomas who is desperate to talk interact with them, but is constantly being excluded. Perhaps some simply turn their backs on him, but others could directly tell him he isn't welcome. Change who is Thomas a few times and then ask the students to feedback how they felt. Was it easy for the townsfolk to cast out Thomas and why? How did Thomas feel being excluded in this way?

The aim here is to establish a sense of detachment between Thomas and his community but also try to unpick why this is. Perhaps try the exercise a second time, but with Thomas trying to cite references from the Bible, or pointing out other people's transgressions to them. Does this change how they see Thomas?

Following this you may wish to explore Thomas' impersonations. Does the way that the other characters react to Thomas affect the way in which he sees and therefore 're-creates' their part of the story? Take a small section of text where Thomas is recreating another character for us and experiment with how this might be delivered. Is there a bitterness or sarcasm in his tone when he speaks their words? Does he make their characteristics more exaggerated or grotesque to highlight to us their flaws?

#### *Preacher*

Thomas' drive in the play is based around his religious beliefs and his desire to rid the town of sin. Take the first and last speeches in the text and ask the students to work in pairs directing each other with the delivery of one of these speeches.

Is Thomas calm and authoritative when he talks, or is he frustrated or angered, or bitter and resentful...? Allow the students to experiment and share with one another. Discuss which versions work and which aren't as successful as well as the potential development of Thomas' 'sermons' from the start to the end of the play.

## The other characters

The students could be asked about any of the figures in the play as if they were actors playing the characters. There are two ways to approach this- looking at the characters in order to realistically portray them through the actor playing Thomas, or to consider how Thomas might interpret the character in his impersonation. Either way students will need to be able to reference how performance skills would be used to bring each of the characters alive on stage.

### *Building the character*

Ask the students to create a still image for each of the characters. What are they doing and how does this link to their occupation or personality? Can the students guess each of the characters through still images alone?

Ask the students to walk around the space as a character of choice. Experiment with different gaits (weight; pace; direction) as well as states of tension. How does this link to their chosen character and their personality?

Using a small section of text for each character and ask the students to annotate with emotions and motivations. Following this ask them to further annotate with potential ways to communicate this through the voice. These ideas can then either be used for personal exploration, or some paired direction. Encourage students to use as wide a range of skills as possible to establish detailed performance that will, in turn, support them in detailed answers in the exam component.

### *Use of the grotesque*

One other way to view the 'others' in the play is through Thomas' eyes. Experiment with exaggerating personality traits or emphasising character flaws in performance. How does Thomas view the people of Inishfree? Is a grotesque and twisted version of reality suited to his thoughts on their 'sins'?

This could be explored further through using masks, ridding the actor of voice or facial expression and placing further emphasis on body language. How does this force the actor to exaggerate? Could they lead with a particular part of their body that links to their 'sin'?

Following each exercise or exploration in class analyse the use of skills alongside the students and ensure they make notes on these for their own developments, or future ideas.

### **Further explorations**

Challenge the students by asking how they might direct an actor playing to demonstrate elements of Thomas and his personality within his 'performance' of the other characters in his story. How does this 'double' identity work on stage, and is there a contrast between the voices on the recordings and the way in which Thomas portrays the characters to us?





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