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SEARCHING FOR JERUSALEM: THE END OF SOCIALIST DREAMS IN WESKER'S PLAY *I'M TALKING ABOUT JERUSALEM*

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Abstract

This study examines how Arnold Wesker presents socialist ideals and critiques social injustices in *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960). The analysis focuses on how the play reflects Wesker's vision of a utopian society. It critiques the socio-economic structures that perpetuate inequality and highlights the intersection of personal relationships and political ideology. The play reflects Britain's cultural shifts during the mid-20th century as it faced the decline of empire and the rise of the welfare state. The study uses close reading to examine themes, dialogue, and character dynamics. This approach explores Wesker's socialist rhetoric. Secondary literature and historical context provide a comprehensive understanding of the play's socio-political significance. The study focuses on the tension between utopian dreams and the practical realities faced by the protagonists. The analysis shows how the play critiques systemic inequalities. It highlights the difficulties of realizing socialist ideals within a capitalist framework. Wesker portrays the characters' struggles as critiques of external societal structures. He also examines their internal battle to align personal lives with political beliefs. The play shows the fragility of utopian dreams in the face of economic struggles, societal resistance, and human limits. However, it maintains an undercurrent of hope. It asserts that collective action and resilience can challenge entrenched injustices. Wesker uses domestic settings and intimate relationships to amplify his socialist message. This makes it both personal and politically powerful. The play explores the connection between political ideology and lived experience. Wesker portrays socialism as a human struggle filled with compromise and persistence. This emphasizes the continued relevance of his work in discussions on justice and equity. The play asserts the value of striving for utopian ideals, despite inevitable obstacles.

Keywords: Socialism, Injustice, Inequalities, Capitalism, Commitment and Class Struggle

Introduction

Arnold Wesker, a leading figure in post-war British theatre, is widely celebrated for his commitment to exploring the struggles of the working class and advocating for social justice. His works often reflect his socialist ideology and his belief in the transformative power of art and collective action. *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960), part of Wesker's celebrated Trilogy, is a deeply personal and political play. It captures the lives of Ada and Dave, a working-class Jewish couple who leave London to establish a utopian life in rural Norfolk. The play is set in the turbulent socio-political environment of post-war Britain, a time of rapid transformation. This period was marked by the decline of the British Empire, the rise of the welfare state, and the increasing dominance of capitalism. Through its exploration of the couple's struggles, aspirations, and

compromises, the play encapsulates Wesker's vision of socialism. His socialism is presented as a deeply human endeavor tied to resilience, hope, and community.

Despite the critical acclaim of Wesker's Trilogy, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* has often received less scholarly attention than Roots and Chicken Soup with Barley. While existing research has broadly focused on Wesker's political convictions and the realism of his works, fewer studies have examined the play in detail. In particular, little attention has been given to how the play articulates the tensions between utopian ideals and the harsh realities of post-war socio-economic conditions. This neglect creates a gap in the critical discourse. It limits our understanding of how Wesker uses domestic settings and intimate relationships as metaphors for larger political struggles. Addressing this gap is crucial to appreciating the depth and complexity of the play. It also highlights its contributions to discussions about social justice and reform.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze how Arnold Wesker uses the play to articulate his socialist ideals and critique the injustices perpetuated by capitalist structures. The study aims to uncover how the play reflects both the resilience and fragility of utopian aspirations. It also seeks to explore how Wesker uses the interplay of personal relationships, particularly between Ada and Dave, to highlight the challenges of reconciling political convictions with lived realities. This study argues that Wesker dramatises a poignant exploration of the resilience and limitations of socialist ideals in a capitalist world. Through the struggles and compromises of its protagonists, he critiques systemic inequalities while asserting the importance of striving for a fairer and more just society.

This study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on a lesser-discussed aspect of Wesker's oeuvre, providing a deeper understanding of play within the context of his broader works. Secondly, it highlights the play's relevance to contemporary debates about social justice, equity, and the feasibility of utopian ideals in a globalized capitalist framework. By situating the play within the socio-political landscape of post-war Britain, the study contributes to a richer appreciation of the historical and cultural contexts that shaped Wesker's vision. Finally, it underscores the continued importance of theatre as a medium for critiquing societal structures and imagining alternative futures. The study focuses on *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* and does not extend its analysis to other plays in the Trilogy, such as *Roots* and *Chicken Soup with Barley*. It primarily examines the text of the play, analyzing themes, dialogues, and character dynamics. While the socio-political context of post-war Britain is integral to the analysis, the study does not delve deeply into Wesker's biography or the reception of his work by contemporary audiences. Furthermore, the study does not include performance analysis. It focuses instead on the written text and its ideological underpinnings.

This research uses close textual analysis to focuses on thematic elements, character interactions, and use of setting to explore how Wesker articulates his socialist ideals. Historical and cultural analysis is used to situate the play within its broader socio-political context. The analysis emphasizes the challenges of implementing utopian ideals

in a post-war capitalist society. Secondary literature on Wesker's works and socialist theatre is consulted to provide critical insights and support the Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into five sections. Following the introduction, the second section provides a detailed exploration of post-war Britain's socio-political landscape and its influence on Wesker's ideology. The third section examines the key themes and characters. It focuses on the critique of systemic inequalities and the representation of socialist ideals. The fourth section discusses the play's contemporary relevance. It links its themes to ongoing global debates on social justice and equity. The final section concludes by summarizing the findings. It reflects on the implications of Wesker's vision for modern audiences and future scholarship. This structure ensures a comprehensive analysis of the play. It situates the play within its historical context and highlights its enduring significance.

Results and Discussions

Arnold Wesker's work is deeply influenced by the socio-political context of post-war Britain. The years following World War II were a time of significant change and upheaval in Britain. The war had left a profound mark on British society, and in its aftermath, the country faced economic challenges, shifts in political power, and social transformation. Wesker's writing, particularly his exploration of working-class struggles and the failure of idealistic socialism, provides a nuanced reflection on the political landscape of the time. Through his characters and plots, Wesker critiques the prevailing socio-political systems and offers insight into the ideological conflicts of the time. Following the end of World War II, Britain was left with a damaged economy. Much of the country's infrastructure had been bombed during the war, and resources were stretched thin. The Labour government elected in 1945, embarked on ambitious plans to rebuild the country, nationalize key industries, and create a welfare state. The post-war consensus led by figures like Clement Attlee emphasized the role of the state in social welfare and economic management. The National Health Service (NHS), established in 1948, and the nationalization of coal, steel, and railroads symbolized the commitment to socialist principles in post-war Britain.

However, these reforms were not without their challenges. The country was still grappling with austerity, rationing, and the aftermath of economic devastation. The promise of socialism and nationalization did not immediately translate into prosperity, and by the late 1950s and 1960s, Britain's economic situation had become increasingly precarious. The rise of consumer culture and the growing reliance on the United States for financial support marked a shift in the country's economic orientation. This shift was seen by many as a sign of the failure of post-war socialist ideals and a retreat into more conservative economic policies.

In his plays, Wesker often explores the tension between the promise of socialism and the reality of post-war economic life. In *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* for example, the characters of Dave and Ada attempt to create a socialist utopia in the countryside, but

their dream ultimately fails in the face of economic pressures and the dominance of industrial capitalism. Dave's failure to realize his vision of a simple, self-sufficient life reflects the difficulty of escaping the material realities of post-war Britain. The factory system, consumerism, and the need for capital were all powerful forces that Dave and Ada could not overcome. As Peter J. Leithart notes, "Wesker's characters are often caught between idealistic socialism and the harsh economic realities of post-war Britain" (2013: 245). This tension between socialist ideals and the realities of a capitalist economy is central to Wesker's critique of post-war British society.

The post-war period in Britain also witnessed significant political shifts. The initial optimism that followed the Labour victory of 1945 gave way to a more complex and less idealistic political landscape by the 1950s and 1960s. The Labour Party, while still in power in the early 1950s, began to face internal divisions, and the party's support among the working class began to wane. In contrast, the Conservative Party, led by Winston Churchill and later by Harold Macmillan, experienced resurgence. The economic difficulties of the 1950s, combined with growing fears about the future of the welfare state, led many Britons to gravitate toward conservative policies that promised stability and economic growth.

In Wesker's work, particularly in plays like *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958) and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, the decline of idealistic socialism is a central theme. His characters—particularly those who embrace socialism—are shown to be disillusioned by the failure of the post-war socialist experiment. Dave and Ada's decision to leave London and set up a socialist commune in the countryside reflects their desire to escape the corrupting influence of industrial capitalism. However, their idealistic attempt to forge a new life outside the constraints of urban society ultimately ends in failure, as Dave is forced to compromise and turn to factory work to sustain himself. Wesker's portrayal of this failure is a commentary on the decline of socialist ideals in the face of economic necessity and the rise of consumerism. John Sutherland argues, "Wesker's exploration of personal disillusionment mirrors the larger political disillusionment that marked Britain's post-war years" (2000: 154).

In the post-war period, Britain underwent a dramatic cultural transformation. The rise of consumerism, fueled by advertising, television, and the growth of the middle class, led to a shift in values. Once the working class had prided itself on thrift and hard work, the new consumer culture emphasized material wealth, comfort, and leisure. The emergence of mass production and the growth of the service sector were signs of Britain's increasing integration into the global capitalist system. As consumer goods became more widely available, the desire for upward mobility became more pronounced, and traditional working-class values began to lose their hold.

Wesker's plays often reflect this cultural shift. The characters' commitment to socialism is increasingly undermined by the allure of consumerism and the changing political landscape. Ada and Dave, for example, want to live a life dedicated to craft and simplicity, yet they are unable to escape the pressures of modern consumer culture.

Dave's decision to begin using machines to produce furniture, for instance, reflects his growing awareness of the difficulties of maintaining an artisanal business in a world dominated by mass production and consumer demand. The rise of consumerism, along with the economic pressures it brings, forces the characters to compromise their ideals.

Wesker critiques this shift through his characters' experiences. Dave's failure to sustain his socialist experiment in the countryside is a direct result of the growing dominance of industrial production and the consumer culture that emerged in post-war Britain. As much as Dave and Ada may long for a life free from the industrialist mindset, the reality of consumerism and economic necessity forces them back into the very systems they sought to reject. Stephen Lacey observes, "Wesker's exploration of post-war disillusionment captures the impact of consumerism on individuals and families who had once sought to build an alternative future" (1999: 203).

By the 1970s, the post-war consensus that had driven Britain's economic and social policies began to unravel. Economic stagnation, rising inflation, and increasing unemployment marked a period of instability. The Labour Party, which had once been the champion of the welfare state, faced increasing challenges from the Conservative Party, which advocated for a more market-driven approach to economic management. The welfare state, which had been created in the aftermath of World War II to provide a safety net for the British people, began to be seen as unsustainable. The rise of neoliberal economic policies, led by figures like Margaret Thatcher, represented a significant shift away from the collectivist ideals of the post-war era.

While Wesker's plays largely focus on the 1950s and 1960s, his critique of the failures of socialism and his portrayal of working-class struggles resonate with the broader political changes that occurred in the 1970s and beyond. Wesker's characters are often caught between the dying ideals of post-war socialism and the rise of a more individualistic, capitalist society. Dave's failure to create his ideal society in the countryside reflects the broader failure of the post-war political and economic consensus. David Edgar suggests, "Wesker's works highlight the tension between idealism and economic reality, revealing the difficulty of sustaining socialist dreams in a world where capitalism and consumerism have become dominant forces" (1994: 119).

Wesker's exploration of the decline of socialism and the challenges of idealism remains deeply relevant to contemporary discussions on politics, economics, and class. As Alan Sinfield argues, "Wesker's plays capture the anxieties of a post-war generation that sought to build a new society but found themselves thwarted by the very systems they sought to escape" (1997: 64). Through his exploration of personal and political failure, Wesker's work continues to resonate with audiences today, offering insight into the struggles of living in a world shaped by capitalist forces and global economic change.

In *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, Arnold Wesker explores the breakdown of Ada and Dave Simmonds' idealistic venture. Their journey spans from 1946, when they leave London, to 1959, when they return, symbolizing the collapse of their personal experiment in socialism. They try to create an alternative to industrial and capitalist

society. Their move to Norfolk is an effort to escape the pressures of urban life and create a simpler, more meaningful existence.

Dave and Ada seek to build a "New Jerusalem" in the countryside, far from the industrial world. Dave plans to make handcrafted furniture, believing it will offer more satisfaction and self-expression. Ada shares his desire to escape factory labor, seeing it as dehumanizing. Dave tells Sarah, "I have worked in the factory and I have seen men hating themselves while they were doing it" (Wesker, 155). This statement shows Dave's disillusionment with industrial capitalism and his wish to live free from it. Ada's retreat to Norfolk is about more than escaping industrialism. For her, it is also about personal fulfillment. She believes that before they can care for the world, they must first care for their own lives. As she says, "How can we care for a world outside ourselves when the world inside is in such disorder?" (Wesker, 14). However, Sarah criticizes their choice to live in the countryside. She believes they are abandoning their political duties. Sarah says, "Not even a road here...a house in the middle of nowhere" (Wesker, 148). She sees their retreat as an escape from the real work of socialism. Wesker shows "the disintegration of political ideology parallels the disintegration of a family" (Tynan, 2007). Dobson, a wartime friend of Dave's, also criticizes their decision. He cannot understand why Dave would give up modern life for an ideal that seems unrealistic. Dobson asks, "You have taken your backward march seriously, eh?" (Wesker, 171). He views their move as disconnected from the practical realities of life. To Dobson, the idea of rejecting jobs, houses, roads, and factories is naive. He argues, "No labourer—no roads! No humdrum jobs, then no anything" (Wesker, 174). He insists that their decision is impractical and will lead to regret.

Despite Dobson's warnings, Ada and Dave persist in their plan. They are determined to prove they can live outside the capitalist system. They believe they can build a better life through self-sufficiency, creativity, and family. Dave wants to create a world where labor is meaningful, not alienating. For them, this experiment represents a rejection of industrial society's exploitation of workers. However, as time goes on, their vision begins to crack. The financial pressures and isolation in Norfolk start to challenge their ideals. The difficulties of living in the countryside are harder than they expected. Ada and Dave's personal and financial struggles make their experiment unsustainable. Their dream of a utopian life begins to fail. Dave's belief in the power of creative labor is tested. He starts using machines to make furniture because he cannot afford to make everything by hand. This marks a shift from his earlier rejection of factory methods. Ada criticizes Dave, saying, "By Christ, Dave—your ideals have got some pretty big leaks in places, haven't they?" (Wesker, 180) The criticism stings, and Dave feels hurt. The failure of their experiment becomes personal. They begin to realize that they cannot live without engaging with the very systems they reject.

Dobson's earlier prediction comes true. Ada and Dave's ideals clash with reality. They are forced to confront the limitations of their vision. The financial pressures, combined with the demands of survival in rural life, prove too much. Dave's ideals of

creative labor clash with the need for money and resources. Ada and Dave's journey highlights the difficulty of realizing a socialist ideal in a world dominated by capitalism.

The play critiques the failure of Ada and Dave's socialist experiment. Their attempt to escape the capitalist system by retreating to the countryside ends in failure. While they seek a simpler, more meaningful life, their dreams cannot withstand the pressures of reality. Their journey illustrates the tension between idealism and practicality. Wesker suggests that the challenges of living outside the capitalist system are greater than they anticipated. Despite their failure, their story raises important questions about the limitations and possibilities of socialist ideals.

Dave's failure to execute his intended enterprise and the collapse of his utopian experiment are at the core of Arnold Wesker's *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960). One key moment that symbolizes the breakdown of Dave's dreams occurs when he steals linoleum from the Colonel's barn. While Dave's intention to take the linoleum might have been innocent, the fact that he did so without informing his employer led to trouble. Honora M. Lynch argues that in this instance, "Dave is revealed as a liar and petty thief who fails at a sort of utopian social experiment" (1999: 486). This marks a critical turning point in Dave's journey, exposing the flaws and contradictions in his pursuit of a simple, idyllic life away from industrial society.

Wesker portrays the personal nature of Dave's failure. The problem is not simply that Dave struggles against an impersonal capitalist system; it is that Dave's idealism, his desire to escape factory labor, cannot withstand the practical realities of life. In this way, Wesker emphasizes the human limitations that inhibit Dave's success. Taylor, too, comments on Dave's failure, pointing out that Ada's criticism highlights the very essence of their dilemma: "It is the warning note: Ada taxes Dave with having brought 'the habits of the factory' with him, and the Colonel asks in genuine puzzlement why they came to the country at all" (140). Dave, a man who sought to leave the factory behind, has become entrenched in the very system he sought to escape.

The linoleum incident is pivotal because it exposes the very contradictions of Dave's character and his inability to break free from the systems of work and power he once rejected. When he takes the linoleum, he believes it is a harmless act; after all, the material is no longer needed, and he assumes that he is allowed to take it. The real issue, however, is not that Dave took the linoleum but that he did so without permission or transparency. His lack of communication with the Colonel ultimately forces him to confront the limitations of his ethical stance. The theft results in Dave's dismissal, and his sacking serves as a reminder of the hierarchical and oppressive structures that govern labor in society.

Dave's response to his dismissal reflects his frustration with the hierarchical master-servant relationship he now finds himself in. He tells himself, "Never get the right sort of master-servant relationship" (178), an expression of his disillusionment with both the factory system and his own attempts to build an alternative. Wesker's portrayal of Dave's character emphasizes the tension between idealism and reality, showing that

Dave's utopian vision is not grounded in practical reality. This tension is compounded by his growing dependence on outside sources of capital to fund his work, particularly the banks from which he seeks loans. As Dave seeks capital to support his workshop, he finds himself in an impossible position, trapped by the very system he has rejected.

Despite his failures, Dave stubbornly holds onto his vision of a simpler, purer life. But as his dream unravels, his personal relationship with Ada begins to deteriorate. Ada's biting remarks intensify Dave's internal conflict and sense of defeat. After the Colonel's visit, Ada criticizes Dave for compromising his ideals: "By Christ, Dave—your ideals have got some pretty big leaks in places, haven't they?" (180). These words hurt Dave deeply, and the stage directions capture his emotional state: "Dave is hurt by this ... this is the first time she has hurt him so deeply. They wander around the room in silence" (Wesker, 180). The emotional distance between the couple, combined with their growing disillusionment, marks the collapse of their dream. The stage direction is critical here, as it underlines the personal failure that has befallen the couple. Dave's idealism is not only shattered by external forces, but also by the emotional toll of their personal relationship.

The growing disillusionment in the play is further compounded by Dave's apprentice, Sammy, who expresses dissatisfaction with his work and expresses a desire to leave. Sammy's decision to leave, seeking work in a factory, is a direct contradiction to Dave's belief in the value of craftsmanship. When Sammy declares, "I want to leave soon... I am not satisfied... Well I don't seem to be getting anywhere" (Wesker, 188), it underscores the tension between the ideals Dave holds and the reality of the economic system that favors factory work. Sammy's choice, driven by the higher wages offered by factory work, is a stark reminder of the economic pressures that render Dave's handcrafted furniture business untenable.

Sammy's departure signifies a major blow to Dave's sense of self-worth and his belief in the worth of craftsmanship. In the face of economic necessity, Sammy chooses factory life over the ideals of artisanal work. Dave's failure to convince Sammy of the value of his craft reflects his growing awareness that his vision of a self-sufficient, idealized life is simply not viable in a world driven by industrialization and capitalism. The fact that Sammy chooses to work for a factory rather than with Dave underscores the fundamental tension between ideals and the economic pressures that shape people's decisions. This failure of mentorship and the collapse of Dave's small business serve as a microcosm of the broader collapse of his utopian experiment.

The culmination of Dave's failure to sustain his ideals is marked by his inability to maintain the furniture business alone. The stage direction notes: "No one works in the barn" (Wesker, 191), highlighting Dave's isolation and the end of his dream. His workshop, once a place of creativity and hope, is now abandoned. This abandonment signifies the collapse of the personal and political vision that Dave and Ada had hoped to realize in the countryside. Dave's inability to maintain the business and his isolation in the barn reflect the larger theme of the play: the failure of personal utopias in the face of societal and economic pressures.

In one of the play's more poignant moments, Dave's aunts, Esther and Cissie, visit the couple in their rural retreat. They are quick to recognize the disillusionment that has set in. Esther, in particular, notes the changes in Dave's approach to his work, pointing out: "... he wanted to make furniture with his own hands. Now he is buying machines, he'll be like a factory... So where's the ideals gone all of a sudden" (Wesker, 193). Esther's words capture the essence of Dave's failure—his move from a hand-crafted, idealized vision of life to the industrialized reality of machine labor. Dave's decision to use machines, despite his earlier rejection of them, represents the compromise of his ideals in the face of economic necessity. His bitterness, and the disillusionment it reveals, signifies the collapse of the dream he once held.

Wesker uses this moment to draw a parallel between the personal failure of Dave and the broader political climate of the time. The play's political context is reflected in the radio announcement of the socialist party's defeat. Wesker subtly links Dave's personal disillusionment with the collapse of socialism in Britain. Ronnie, a character who serves as Wesker's mouthpiece for political commentary, articulates this connection, saying: "Whole generation of us laid down our arms and retreated into ourselves ... But you two. I don't understand what happened to you two. I used to ... boast about you... But look at us now, now it's all of us" (Wesker, 208). Ronnie's words underscore the generational and political disillusionment that runs parallel to Dave's personal defeat. Just as socialism has failed to live up to its promises, so too has Dave's personal experiment in a rural utopia.

Dave's ultimate failure is a result of his inability to escape the patterns of factory life. Despite his efforts to live outside the capitalist system, he finds himself drawn back into it, both personally and professionally. His reliance on machines and his need for outside capital to fund his enterprise reflect the dominance of industrial techniques and the difficulty of escaping them. In this way, Wesker critiques the limitations of individual attempts to reject the capitalist system. The dream of living outside of industrial society, while noble, is ultimately unfeasible in the context of a world driven by capitalism and industrialization.

As the play draws to a close, Dave reflects on his defeat. He realizes that his dream of a rural, idealized life was untenable and that he has failed. In the final moments of the play, Dave accepts his failure, saying: "face it— as an essential member of society I don't really count... I'm defeated" (Wesker, 16). This moment of resignation signals the end of Dave's utopian dream. The play concludes on a note of personal failure, but it also suggests that such failure is an integral part of the process of growth and understanding. Dave's journey, while marked by defeat, is also a journey of maturation.

Wesker's portrayal of Dave's failure emphasizes that, while the pursuit of one's ideals is important, it must be tempered by an understanding of the social and economic realities that shape those ideals. The personal nature of Dave's failure, rather than a critique of society as a whole, reflects Wesker's interest in the human condition and the complexities of individual agency in a world dominated by larger forces. As Dave accepts

defeat, Wesker suggests that, despite the collapse of their ideal, Dave and Ada have matured through their experience. Though their experiment in rural socialism has failed, it has not been without value. They have learned, through hardship and disappointment, the complexity of the world they sought to change.

Conclusion

In I'm Talking About Jerusalem, Arnold Wesker explores the conflict between socialist ideals and the realities of post-war Britain. The play shows the failure of the Simmonds family's attempt to create a socialist utopia. This study examined how Wesker critiques the decline of socialist dreams in the face of economic and social pressures. The study reveals that Wesker's play critiques the collapse of socialist ideals. Dave and Ada's attempt to build a self-sufficient, socially conscious life ends in failure. Their struggle represents the broader decline of socialism in post-war Britain. The characters' idealism clashes with the reality of industrial capitalism. This failure reflects the political challenges of the time, including austerity and the rise of consumerism. These findings suggest that Wesker's work critiques post-war Britain's socio-political landscape. His portrayal of the failure of socialism reflects a wider disillusionment in the 1950s and 1960s. The rise of capitalism and consumerism limited the possibilities for socialist alternatives. Wesker's play continues to offer insight into the struggle between idealism and economic reality. This study focuses primarily on the socio-political themes of the play. It does not fully explore the aesthetic and theatrical aspects. The analysis is also limited to the British context and does not compare socialist movements in other countries. Further research could examine these additional dimensions and offer a broader perspective. It could look at Wesker's entire body of work. Comparing his treatment of socialism across different plays would deepen the analysis. Studies could also explore the play's impact on contemporary political thought. Research could investigate the role of gender and class in Wesker's portrayal of working-class life. Lastly, exploring the play's reception could reveal how audiences reacted to its themes.

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