Men Should Weep

Ena Lamont Smith
Background

Set in the 1930s, Men Should Weep was originally performed by the Glasgow Unity Theatre at the Athenaeum Theatre in 1947, but was adapted and revived again, to popular acclaim, in 1982 by Glasgow’s 7:84 Company.

A further revival by the National Theatre in 2010 has helped to cement its reputation as one of the most beloved plays of the twentieth century.

The 1947 version of the play

Ena Lamont Stewart was responsible for the rewrite of the 1982 version that is part of the Scottish set text list for Higher English which will be examined in more depth in this study guide.

However, it is important to note the considerably bleaker tone and narrative outcome of her 1947 version, which the original Glaswegian audience would have recognised from their own recent history.

Whereas the 1982 revival is upbeat in the face of hardship and poverty and employs comic effects to detract from the misery of the setting and circumstances of the play, the original version dreamed up by Lamont Stewart is unrelentingly dark.
The hardships the characters had to endure reflected the realism of their struggles, imposed upon them due to poverty and unemployment with no deliberate attempt to present this life in a positive or comical light.

In the 1947 version, young Bertie dies, John steals from Lily and returns to alcoholism (something that is threatened but never realised in the 1982 rewrite), Alec carries out his threat to kill Isa, Granny is forced into the poorhouse, Jenny returns to the family home a destitute prostitute and Maggie dies in childbirth.

The 1982 revival

In contrast to the initial darker version of the play, Lamont Stewart’s rewrite for 7:84 at the Citizens Theatre paints more sunshine into the picture and it remains debatable which is the preferred draft.

Many critics of theatre have pointed to the lack of realism in the more positive ending of the 1982 version. However, modern mainstream audiences would find it hard to tolerate the unrelenting tragedy and hopelessness of the original.

The revived version was able to offer hope to the resilient Morrisons; by extension, the largely working-class 1982 audience would have seen hope in the play for themselves.

7:84 was a prominent theatre group with pronounced Socialist sympathies. They would stage plays that dramatized issues of poverty and social injustice.

Their name comes from a statistic published in The Economist in 1966 that stated that 84 per cent of British wealth was at the time in the hands of the seven wealthiest per cent of the population. The injustice of this statistic permeates the play.

Sexual inequality

The title itself sarcastically conveys the playwright’s view of men of the time whose shameful behaviour towards their stalwart women was a disgrace, despite their shared experience of poverty, unemployment and shame.

Women were expected to take care of the home

The title appears to appeal to these men to look afresh at the position adopted by the women of the home in keeping morale and domestic routine together. At various points, especially
towards the conclusions of conflicts in the play, John Morrison reflects on the injustice of the situation he finds himself in.

His hand-wringing and despair is contrasted with the solidity and resilience of his wife Maggie who rarely collapses into self-pity. By the end of the play, it is Maggie and not John who is standing strong.

The title perhaps invites male audiences to think on the reasons for their self-pity, and to act to overcome it.

The play certainly does not sentimentalise or romanticise poverty but instead provides us with a realistic interpretation of what poverty does to weak people.

The author

Ena Lamont Stewart was born on 10 February in Glasgow in 1912. The only daughter of a clergyman and his wife who had originated from Canada, she spent much of her life in the city, growing up to work as a librarian within Baillie’s reference library.

She married Scottish actor Jack Stewart and together they had a son, William. The married couple joined Glasgow’s MSU Repertory Theatre in Rutherglen, which went on to produce her first play in 1942, Distinguished Company.

Three years later, the same company produced her next successful play, Starched Aprons. The play itself was based on Lamont Stewart’s own observations from working as a receptionist at the city centre’s children’s hospital.

Ena Lamont Stewart was shocked at the living conditions in the Gorbals

Working there, she was disturbed by the poverty of those living in the Gorbals, suffering from malnutrition, tuberculosis and other ‘poor’ diseases.

It was in this role that she picked up on the rhythms and nuances of everyday speech which is certainly a hallmark of the play’s realism.

Ena Lamont Stewart was also perhaps initially inspired to write and reflect the real Glasgow because of her disdain for the narrow conventional drama previously on offer:

One evening in the winter of 1942 I went to the theatre. I came home in a mood of red-hot revolt against cocktail time, glamorous gowns and under-worked, about-to-be-deceived husbands. I asked myself what I wanted to see on stage and the answer was life. Real life. Ordinary people.
Writer and broadcaster, Kenneth Roy, who was a good friend and long-time champion of Ena Lamont Stewart wrote the following about her:

It was such a male chauvinist society then and it was difficult for any women writers to make any impression…She was always thought of as a Communist, but she was actually just a great critic and observer. Some of her abilities were journalistic. She observed the society around her, and had this uncanny ability of scraping up language and turning it into these great works of art.

Characters

Maggie

Maggie is the central protagonist. The play charts her journey towards finding her strength and role as leader of the family and as an individual.

In Act I, we witness many of the challenges she has to face as a working class housewife in the East End of Glasgow in the 1930s. She attends to her children, her husband and Granny as if she is mother to all of them. She still idolises her eldest son, despite his poor behaviour. This shows her loving and perhaps overly stoic nature.

Circumstances become strained, however, due to the arrival of Alec and Isa, the departure of her daughter and the revelation that Bertie is suffering from tuberculosis. Burdened by the weight of her family, Maggie breaks down.

It is the accumulation of events that forces her to take control in the climax of the play.
Maggie's journey

When the play begins, Maggie, despite the hardships she must face, appears to be content in her role as wife and mother. She puts all her energy into raising her bairns and the language of the play reinforces this.

She is often described as coming in at a run in order to clout her children and we see her seize Edie, then thrust her away after examining her head for lice. It is clear that Maggie has an exhausting task.

When Lily tries to get Maggie to realise that she has sacrificed her own self for her husband and family, she is quick to defend her situation: You leave John alane! He does his best for us.

Household cleaning was hard in the 1930s

She counts herself as lucky because there is still love in her marriage. She accepts her lot and its difficulties because she is paid wi love, which is more important to her than a husband with a job and a decent home.

However, Maggie changes as she gradually becomes more and more worn down by performing such a tiring role. After arriving back from hospital, clutching Bertie’s shoes, she must deal with Jenny’s departure. A month later, she is confronted with her weak, grown-up son suffering at the hands of his belligerent wife.

The love she has for her children, particularly those she feels she has failed, is obvious, as she always tries to placate Jenny and is easily taken in by Alec’s demonstrations of illness. However, in Act II she is disappointed in her son’s dishonesty and her husband’s lack of support and she leaves the house to return stoney eyed.

The stage directions note Ernest’s suspicion of this new silent, grim-mouthed woman making tea in the kitchen. We are reminded of the description of Lily as hard-mouthed here, which implies that Maggie is adopting a similar capacity for independence.

This pre-empt the scene in which she cries hysterically and collapses in a storm of weeping. Perhaps through exposure to Lily, and to the younger generation of females, Maggie begins to recognise her life for what it is. So in the final scene, we see a character motivated to take control, able to first humiliate and then manage her sensitive husband, so that she can make her forgotten long-ago dream a reality.
Lily

The character of Lily provides an interesting parallel to Maggie. As a spinster, she is independent and without the burdens of children and keeping a family home.

She has feminist views and is not afraid to speak her mind. This may seem commonplace for us, but would have shocked a 1947 audience. Lily looks out for Maggie by supporting her and bringing her gifts of food and medicine for Bertie.

She does not understand Maggie’s tolerance of John, and, as a result, often reveals her disapproval. However, despite her animosity, Lily loves her sister and wants to see her living a better life.

Lily the feminist

Lily’s views would have been controversial in post-war Scotland. Whether it is because of an early disappointment to which Maggie alludes, she is very cynical about men and refuses to be a slave to them, which she feels is the consequence of marriage.

She tries to make Maggie and the audience aware of a wife’s predicament in an age when birth control was not widely practised. Lily blames John for giving Maggie the weans; thus perpetuating her slavish existence.

The limitations on women in the 1930s are apparent in the comments she makes about John:

Yin o they days your loving Johnnie’s gonna tak a look at whit he married and it’ll be ta-ta Maggie.

Despite its harsh tone and its bitterness, Lily’s warning rings true, especially when we consider John’s mildly flirtatious behaviour with Isa, which Maggie refers to later on.

Lily’s role therefore, is to get Maggie to literally and metaphorically look in the mirror in order to assert her own self. She is delighted when Maggie humiliates her husband at the end of the play as we can see from the stage directions:

Lily, arms akimbo, eyes a-gleam, laughs coarsely, and hugs herself.

Her physical stance with arms akimbo is one of victory and her gleaming eyes suggest the frisson of joy she experiences at watching such a man shamed by his wife.

Ironically, her elation here is not supportive of Maggie who is clearly upset and immediately regretful of her outburst. Instead Lily simply takes pleasure in seeing a man suffer, which confirms her unflinching feminist mindset.

John

Despite the fact that the audience is angered by John’s chauvinistic mentality, we still empathise with his character to an extent.

Living in poverty, unable to find work, John cannot provide for his family and has an awareness of his responsibility in the hardship the whole family must suffer.
John does love Maggie, and there are poignant scenes when he gives her a plate of beans and buys her a hat at Christmas. However, he is still unprepared to deviate from what he considers to be the male role and at several points he disappoints as result.

We are also concerned by his softness towards a character like Isa and the fact he does not accompany Maggie to the hospital with Bertie– the one place that she is fearful of.

At the end of the play, he suffers a threefold humiliation:

- his unpressed sexual desire is exposed by his wife
- Lily reveals the truth about how much financial assistance she has given his family over the years
- he is forced to step back as Maggie takes control.

Unlike Maggie, John is not strong enough to actively confront his true self and we leave him slumped and speechless at the close of Act III.

**John and traditional male role**

When John first enters in Act 1, Scene 1, the stage directions tell us about him and his relationship with his wife.

John comes in carrying books under his arm. He is a big, handsome man. He puts down his books, gives Maggie a pat: they exchange warm smiles.

John is carrying books, which implies an attempt at self-improvement, but this may be something he simply carries, totes around, like hollow good intentions.

Stewart notes his attractive appearance – unlike what Lily tells us about Maggie, John has not lost his looks, making him still sexually appealing to women like Isa.

He gives Maggie a pat which connotes the warmth in their relationship while at the same time implying a certain assumed superiority in his manner. Shortly after his entrance, he criticises women for having nae system.

The muddle in which they live would be ordered and structured if it wis (his) job... but thankfully for John, it’s no (his) job and he cannot see beyond this, even when his wife is exhausted and struggling to keep going: I’m no turnin masel intae a bloomin skivvy! I’m a man! It is his pride at stake here, and we see this again when he refuses to accept Jenny’s money in Act III: We’re wantin nane o yer whore’s winnins here.

John’s anger is because he realises he has failed in the role he is so set on maintaining. He has identified himself as the man, the heid of this hoose, but has done nothing to fulfil this role.

Ironically, after this assertion, he becomes a passive spectator with his face in his hands. We wonder whether he is indeed weeping (as heshould be) at the realisation of his ineffectiveness while the women take charge.
Jenny

Representative of the younger generation, Jenny feels trapped within the oppressive family home, reminding us of the way Lily and perhaps even Maggie herself was when younger. Jenny has dreams and motivation to move beyond the financial restrictions of her upbringing.

She is John’s favourite and provokes his anger when she leaves, as he is horrified at her liberal behaviour. He also feels guilty for not being able to provide for her properly.

Jenny departs in Act II as the attitudinal and rebellious daughter and returns regretful, ready to make amends. Her promise of a new home and new life gives the play its optimistic ending, and sets the scene for Maggie’s transformation.

Jenny’s role

We hear a lot about Jenny before she enters the play as we wait, along with her mother and father, for her to return home.

Unlike Isa, who is dismissed by all the characters bar one, Jenny was once a kind wee lassie, but she has become embittered by life in apig-sty. When she finally enters she is somewhat unkempt after her night on the town:

made up boldly (for the 1930s): her lipstick is spread over her mouth, her coat and blouse undone, her hair tousled.

The boldness of her make-up reflects her confident challenging of the status quo, while her dishevelled state with spread lipstick and undone clothing implies her uninhibited sexual behaviour as well as reminding us of the muddle that she has grown up in.

Jenny asserts herself in front of her father, declaring that she plans to give up her job I’m chuckin the shop with no concern for her family.
Hurtfully, she dismisses any duty she might have to her parents in favour of striking out on her own: It’s no ma job tae keep your weans. It’s yours. This, on top of the threat she presents to John’s pride, provokes the physical conflict when John hits her.

In Act III, when Jenny reappears, she is much changed. No longer dressed in tarty clothes, she has come to make amends for the mistakes of her past. We see her with head bent listening to John’s chastisement.

Rather than bringing the play full circle, her return at the end signals a new beginning for the Morrisons, thus making her an important character.

**Alec and Isa**

Alec and Isa provide a contrast to John and Maggie. Alec embodies John’s weaker qualities. He is lazy and feeble, and lashes out (sometimes violently) when provoked by his recalcitrant wife.

Described by Maggie as delicate, Alec has dedicated his life to Isa and cannot handle the thought of her leaving him.

Essentially he is spoilt and takes advantage of his mother’s love for him – when he wants cigarettes and attention from Maggie we see him play-acting for all he’s worth and later he craftily slinks out with most of the money from Maggie’s purse, which suggests he has an insidious nature that shocks his mother.

Although she has a strong spirit and is by no means controlled by her husband, Isa is an almost grotesque character.

She is disliked by most and is constantly rude to Maggie. Her sexual appetite is apparent, and we are perturbed by the advances she makes towards John, her father-in-law. Unlike his mother, Isa does not submit to Alec’s demands and is constantly admonishing him.

For her, independence does not come from gender equality. Rather, she is prepared merely to leave one marriage to find another man who can provide for her financially.

She declares that she likes a man tae be a man. Staun up for hissel – not a trait of her feeble husband.

**Other characters**

**Granny**

Granny represents the plight of the elderly. She is shunted between Maggie and Lizzie’s house and is a burden to the family.

Maggie treats her like one of her bairns: cut oot the music Granny, ma heid’s splittin. Time you wis in yer bed. Aware of her lack of purpose, we often see her whining and rocking and wishing her time away Oh, it’s time I wisna here!
Granny allows us insight into other characters. Isa treats her with disrespect and Lizzie is only interested in her money – both characters that do not engender sympathy from the audience.

Granny also offers moments of comic relief. When Maggie is hurt at Lily’s reaction to her new hat, Granny provides a diversion by dropping her biscuit into her tea. While providing humour it also reveals a perceptiveness which is hidden by her caricatural posturing.

**The neighbours**

Mrs Wilson, Mrs Bone and Mrs Harris act as a Greek chorus in the play. They are not part of the Morrison household and yet they flit in and out of it helping with Granny, giving commentaries on the events while also bringing the outside world into the setting – for instance they bring the news of the collapse of Alec’s flat.

They represent the community of the tenements and how folk would lend a hand one minute and gossip about you the next.

When Lily gives Maggie gloves for Christmas, Mrs Wilson whispers they cost only "a bob the pair in Woollies", which is a snide remark, and yet in the same scene she expresses genuine concern for Bertie.

All three women are married to men who exist off stage, and it is implied that they too have difficult lives to which they return.

Mrs Harris’s husband enters in Act III by thudding on the door and shouting through it Is ma wumman there? Well, tell her tae get the Hell oot o it. I’m wantin some atten-shun – to a modern audience this is almost comic, Neanderthal behaviour, but, despite her insistence that she is in charge, she still goes to him. Do these neighbours then have the right to criticise the Morrisons?

**Plot**

**Act I**

**Scene one**
The play opens on a chaotic tenement setting, with Maggie calling for her children out of the window.

A light-hearted domestic scene ensues with Granny complaining in the corner, the children running in from outside and Maggie soothing the baby and Bertie.

Underlying the cheerful mood however, is the concerning deficiency of necessities. These are made more apparent by the arrival of Lily who reminds Maggie of her impoverished predicament.

When John enters there is obvious affection between husband and wife, and an apparent tension between spinster Lily and chauvinist John. Offended by John, Lily leaves declaring she has lent Alec money.

The neighbours enter with news of Alec’s house collapsing and the scene closes with Mrs Harris annoyed at Maggie for accusing her daughter of having lice in her hair.

**Scene two**

The scene takes place towards midnight of the same day. Alec and Isa enter. The family are putting them up after the collapse of their tenement.

Alec is drunk, and already the dynamic between him and his wife is clear. He fawns over her – we see how he paws her - while she pushes him away.

John’s disapproval and disappointment in his son are revealed by his tone Whit I’d like tae dae is kick him oot o the house. Maggie placates and despairs.

After Isa and John take Alec off, John returns, and there is a moment of affection between Maggie and John. They then eat a tin of beans together and Maggie has to admit that Jenny is not yet home.

The mood darkens as John reacts angrily to this. He hears her outside and goes out, then drags her inside.

Jenny is furious and says she is leaving; conflict ensues between father and daughter, which culminates in John hitting her. The scene ends with John staring out of the window, smoking.

**Act II**

**Scene one**

This scene takes place a week later. The neighbours are looking after Granny while she waits on Lizzie to pick her up. We sympathise with Granny here, who clearly wants to stay with Maggie.

When Lizzie arrives, we realise she is a hard-hearted woman, who can only see Granny’s pension. Jenny, Alec and Isa enter, followed soon after the removal men who have come to take Granny’s bed.
The first man chastises Isa for the way she speaks to Granny, forcing her to apologise, which is more than Alec can do. Maggie arrives upset with the news that Bertie has TB and must stay at the hospital.

Several of the characters, led by Lily, sympathise, but the scene ends with Jenny’s departure and an emotional speech from John in which he deliberates over his unjust predicament.

Scene two

It is now a month later and Isa and Alec are arguing because Isa says she will leave him for Peter Robb. We see the first display of Alec’s violence when he gets hold of her by the throat out of anger and desperation.

When Maggie enters, he playacts for sympathy and attention, and finally takes her money. John is critical of his son and comforts Isa. Maggie is upset that he does not stand up for his wife and walks out.

Isa then flirts with John, which makes the audience question his strength of character. The scene ends with Maggie’s breakdown into hysteria, which contributes to her decision at the end of the play.

Act III

The final act begins on a positive note. The mood is upbeat like the beginning of the play, but the audience notices that the kitchen is tidy, there is a wireless playing jazz music, Ernest has new football boots and Maggie is in a new dress.

This is all because John has found work. When he enters, he is happy and confident to be back in his role as provider and he movingly gives Maggie a red hat which reminds her of their courting days.
Although Maggie's neighbours and later Lily are not impressed by the hat, Maggie insists on wearing it and she goes out window shopping on Sauchiehall Street.

After a time lapse, Isa enters and starts to pack up her things. She makes it to the threshold with her suitcase only to find Alec standing there wild-eyed. Alec tries to strangle her for the second time, but again lets go.

Isa pretends she loves him in order to leave and cunningly trips Alec up and races out the door, leaving him sobbing. After he has followed her out, Maggie and Lily re-enter and discover the mess the argument has created.

Lily hides the knife in her handbag and Maggie, no longer happy, sits slumped in misery at the actions of her unruly son. Lily looks after Maggie and there is a poignant moment between the two sisters.

The Act draws to a close with the arrival of Jenny, who has found a sugar daddy to keep her, and has pulled herself up from rock bottom. Jenny reveals the truth about Bertie and comes with a roll of notes that are to pave the way for Maggie’s new life.

John returns and there is immediate tension between father and daughter. He refuses the money and dismisses her attempt at helping the family, saying she hasn’t earned the money. However, Maggie usurps his status of head of the house, takes the money and then humiliates John in front of Lily.

The play ends with Maggie imagining her future, so it is therefore an optimistic conclusion.

**Key scene - Maggie's breakdown**

**Act II, Scene two**

This is a significant scene in Maggie’s journey towards independence, as in it she realises she cannot tolerate the status quo. It begins with Isa and Alec arguing, which establishes the theme of conflict.

When Maggie enters, her exhaustion is clear: she is dead beat and sinks into a chair. Having spent the day cleaning, she comes home to find the place like a midden and voices her frustration to John: ye could have tidied the place up afore ye went oot, but John declares he is a man and not a skivvy.

Later John takes Isa’s side and criticises Maggie for spoiling Alec. This hurts Maggie as she expects her husband tae stand up for his wife. Angrily she goes out: She seizes her coat and hauls it on, jams on her terrible old hat.

The verbs seizes, hauls, jams convey the force of her actions and hence her strength of feeling. She is also shocked by Alec’s theft of her money she can’t help making a small sound.

Maggie is let down by her husband and then her son and is realising where her selfless dedication to her family has led her. She looks at John coldly, portraying a new detachment from her husband.

The tension between John and Maggie builds to a climax at the end of the scene. Maggie returns with chips for dinner but is still stoney-eyed.
While she quietly moves to the kitchen and puts the kettle on, John turns his back on her, conveying the strain between them. Ernest is not used to his mother being like this. Hungry, he steals a chip without asking and his sister hits him.

As he lifts his foot to kick Edie, Maggie sees the scuffed toe-caps of his boots and any self-control she had gives way. This is the final straw because it is yet another example of her efforts and money being used up for little gain.

She screams and cries hysterically I hate ye! I hate the hale lot o ye! This is Maggie’s nadir. She cannot take the relentless graft any longer. She exits, leaving John to calm the children, a job that she has done so often before.

Interestingly John explains to them When women gets that tired they kind o loss their heids as if this is an attribute of the female sex.

Maggie re-enters calmly, apologising for her hysteria. John pats her accordingly, and we wonder whether she may resume her stoic status, but the Maggie we see at the end of Act III proves that she does not forget her breaking point, nor the constant heartburn she suffers as mother to seven children living in severe poverty.

**Key scene - Maggie’s decision**

**Act III**

The end of Act III is of crucial importance in the play. It is in this scene that Maggie loses her stereotypical housewife status to become something much more significant.

Jenny’s arrival is the pivotal moment because Jenny provides them with hope for a better future so that Maggie’s dreams that have been a long time forgotten can be realised.

John declares in his prideful voice: If there is onythin tae be done, it’ll be done by me, but he is then challenged by Lily who says she has had tae fight hauf [his] battles for [him] and then again by Maggie who speaks to him about the council house with a note of pleading in her voice.

It is ironic that after John asserts his position of authority as heid o this hoose that he is passive for the rest of the scene as the women take over.

After accusing Jenny of being a whore, John is humiliated. Firstly by Jenny who says she never had a chance at being with a decent fella because John was never able to provide her with a house she could bring such a man home to, and secondly, by Maggie.

She significantly stops combing her hair which is a sign of her stress and indecisiveness and interposes herself between Jenny and John. These are deliberate actions, different to those of the earlier chaotic Maggie. She then speaks with uncharacteristic force, declaring that they wull be happy!

She describes her coortin days, horrifying John with her whispered impression of John’s lustful persuasion. She persists until John has sunk into a chair, covering his face with his hands, utterly shamed.
Despite regretting her behaviour towards John, Maggie resolves to have a better life. While Jenny kneels before John, adopting her child-like status, calling him Daddy and asking to go back to the past when they both loved each other, Maggie takes charge.

She says she can manage her husband and holding the roll of notes as if it were the key to her happiness, she describes her future where they live in a spacious house.

The final line There’ll be flowers come the spring! ends the play optimistically, as flowers represent the aesthetic world that Maggie has never been able to inhabit, while spring connotes new life full of new opportunities and growth.

**Setting**

Men Should Weep is set in Glasgow’s East End in the 1930s. This was a time of political upheaval and poverty for many. The play gives us in insight into the effects of the Depression, portraying those who had to carry on with their lives amidst such deprived conditions.

A family from the Gorbals

Families had to share cramped living spaces with poor sanitation, and disease was rife.

With no NHS in operation, people had to buy medicines they could ill afford, so often cases such as Bertie’s were left unchecked until they became very severe – hence the suddenness of Maggie not being allowed to take Bertie home.

Although some of the results of poor conditions depicted, such as prevalent TB, are specific to the time there are parallels that can be drawn with modern life.

The depression made getting a job very hard in the 1930s
Poverty is a major concern today, and many children still suffer as a result of living in poor, damp housing with little prospect of escape from such a situation. On this level, as well as many others, we can identify with the situation presented in the drama.

The play also gives us a window into 1930s Glasgow – a place with no computers, mobile phones or televisions.

Children played outside, women chatted, leaning out of the windows of tenements, listened to the wireless. For a treat they went into town to look at the shops on Sauchiehall Street. The men had to wait to see if there was any work and often ended up in the pub.

The tenement

The Morrisons’ home is ill-suited to a family of nine. Most of the action takes place in the kitchen, but we often see Maggie disappear to tend to her sleeping children beyond the curtain partition, or to soothe Bertie in the back parlour.

We also learn of the cramped conditions from Jenny, who describes sleeping in a bed-closet in aside a snorin aul wife.

The overall impression of the setting is that it is untidy and in disarray. We are told that Nappies hang on a string across the fireplace and the table, dresser etc, are in a clutter. We are reminded of the disorder when characters are often presented looking for things.

Edie, who needs to wash her neck, cannot find the flannel, and both Maggie and Edie have to search the house for a comb when she might have head lice. When Lily first enters -

She stands in the middle of the kitchen and surveys Maggie’s muddle, sighs, takes off her coat and ties a towel round her waist, rolls up her sleeves and wonders where to start.

The expression Maggie’s muddle is a significant one, as it implies the physical state of the home but also the metaphorical hectic and cluttered existence she leads.

Lily arrives and without any greeting readies herself to help which conveys the closeness of their relationship. The fact that she wonders where to start however, implies that there are so many difficulties - she doesn’t know how to help Maggie.

At the beginning of scenes throughout Act I and Act II, the stage directions tell us we are in the same tenement, in the same kitchen, looking in on the same family, in the same oppressive circumstances. This helps the audience to understand the monotony and unrelenting nature of Maggie’s life.

However, while the setting of Act III is also the same, it has improved as a result of John having a job. Now we see that the kitchen is clean, tidy and festive, Maggie is in a new dress and Granny smiles now and again.

This highlights the effect on the characters when the burden of poverty is lifted, even if only by a little - a certain clarity emerges from the chaotic midden.

There is also a connection between the setting and Maggie herself. While she inhabits a messy tenement, her physical appearance is also dishevelled.

Lily describes her as looking half-deid, but Maggie says she has no time to see to her looks. The parallel is realised further in Act III when Maggie makes the decision to take the future of her family into her own hands by accepting Jenny’s money.
It is significant that this independent and assertive action, the first from Maggie in the play, is reflected by the potential move into a better and larger house that is more equipped to deal with a family of five young children.

**The tenement community**

While tenement life was a hard and unrelenting one, it did have a sense of community that is lacking in our modern society.

The way that the neighbours come in and look after Granny when Maggie is away at the hospital reveals a co-operative society where people help those in distress. They also come to have tea and to ask for a wee tate this or that.

At times Maggie is tried by their presence. They are interfering and gossip about her - Problems! she hasnae hauf got them, Puir Maggie. Maggie is afraid that they are continually passing judgement on Alec’s previous crimes -

Mrs Harris and Mrs Bone- and yon Wilson wumman – everytime her an Alec comes face tae face, I can see her rememberin.

The lack of privacy in the tenement setting is apparent here. Alec’s actions can never be covered up by the family. Folk know your business and you know theirs.

Due to the number of people living in such an overcrowded space, gossip spreads through the closes as does infection and infestations like head lice. Despite the restricted living conditions, the Morrisons’ lives are exposed to the vast neighbourhood.

John is quite bitter about the intrusive wumman. He says sarcastically on their arrival in Act I - Come in ladies, come in. It’s aye open hoose here. This is perhaps because to John they represent a cohesive female group that might be assessing his own behaviour.

Maggie admits the reason for such living - It’s only rich folks can keep theirselves tae theirselves. Folks like us hev tae depend on their neighbours when their needed help.

Again poverty is defining their lives for them. Maggie can’t escape her neighbours, just as she can’t escape her hardships.

**Poverty**
Poverty dominates the Morrisons’ lives. We see it reflected in the setting, the stage directions and the dialogues between the characters.

The stage set with its doors, curtains and bed recess gives the impression of a confined space, as if the characters are limited by their circumstances. They even struggle to possess fundamental clothing. Edie wears a miscellaneous collection of cast-off clothing and Lily realises later that she’s no got a pair o knickers to her name.

Lily despairs at Maggie’s situation and tries to help, bringing medicine and food and also lending money to help Alec. The deprived setting exacerbates Bertie’s condition and he is not allowed home. Jenny notes in Act III:

It’s rotten, this hoose. Rotten. Damp. Ye ken yersel. It’s a midden looking oot on ither middens. It’s got rats, bugs.

The severity of the conditions is apparent here. While Maggie denies the bugs, the rest of it cannot be repudiated.

The repetition of rotten as well as placing it in a minor sentence followed by damp works to convey the indisputable point that they are living in a slum.

The idea that they are one family in amongst a host of other people in the same position is implied by the expression midden looking oot on ither middens, as if the only window out of their disintegrating flat looks onto the prospect of more poverty.

As well as damaging health, poverty also damages pride. We are told that Maggie stands outside Jenny’s work waiting to see if she can get any bruised fruit and vegetables. Jenny is angered by this, partly because it is degrading – she says she is sick of her mother disgracin her afore the hale shop. The audience sympathises with Maggie here who apologetically tells her daughter she’s resorted to this because she is just desperate for money.

However, it is John whose pride is most affected by their deprivation. He believes he is the breadwinner and yet he can’t deliver.

The dirty rotten buggers in Parliament have left him unable to provide for his family and he feels helpless. He voices the cruel predicament of those in poverty in in Act II, Scene 2, one of the longest speeches in the play:

If I could hae jist- jist done better by ye a. If I could hae…(Head in hands, eyes on floor) If! If! Every time I’ve had tae say ‘no’ tae yon an the weans it’s doubled me up like a kick in the stomach. (Lifting his head and crying out) Christ Almighty! A we’ve done wrong is tae be born intae poverty! Whit dae they think this kind o life dis tae a man? Whiles it turns ye intae a wild animal. Whiles ye’re a human question mark, aye askin why? Why? Why? There’s nae answer. Ye end up a bent back and a heid hanging in shame for whit ye canna help.

We can see from this that John feels almost beaten by poverty. With his head in hands he says not being able to provide for his children feels like being punched in the stomach and he has a bent backand a heid hanging in shame.

The repeated use of the conditional if – if only it wasn’t like this - implies that John feels he has not been given a chance in life.

Living with nothing has turned him into a wild animal, which perhaps alludes to his primitive surroundings or the uninhibited sexual desire that has given him so many children (this is the one area he has left in which he has not been deemed impotent).
The overall impression here is of a man who is broken and is questioning the justice of his fate. We can empathise with him, as he does endure hardship, but it is interesting to compare his reaction to circumstances with that of the women in the play.

Finally in Act III, John, whose masculinity is threatened by Jenny’s plans, says he’d an idea [he] wis the heid o this hoose.

He is trying to defend his status here, reminding his family that he is charge - however, he fails in this. The very expression he uses an idea suggests that this power, this control is something that has never been concrete.

He adheres to the traditional male role only in theory because in practice he can’t deliver. Thus Maggie is able to usurp this flimsy authority.

Role of women/female emancipation

In contrast to passive men, we have a set of active women in this play:
- Maggie, who is always on her feet, running after her family.
- Lily, who helps her.
- Jenny, who physically walks out of the home only to return months later with money.
- Isa, who also breaks out of her marriage.
- Lizzie, who raids Maggie’s kitchen to find food she is owed.
- The neighbours, who rush in with news or leave hurriedly to tend on their husbands.

They are all busy doing, while the men are often idle.

Words like feeble, wilting, morosely, pleading are frequently used to describe Alec while John is portrayed several times with his head in his hands or with his head bent. Alec spends his days pining for Isa’s attention, while his father waits for work – neither are particularly admirable or impressive pursuits.
The world presented in Stewart’s play therefore, is not one run by men, but one run by women – from which one woman rises up to take more authority than a 1947 audience would expect.

Women were expected to do laundry and housekeeping

It was undoubtedly the woman’s job to organise the home at that time and an earlier audience would not be surprised to hear John dismiss the idea of tidying, even after Maggie has been out cleaning all day to earn money.

However, the decisions were still made by the men as heads of the household. Act III therefore, brings in an interesting twist which would have been controversial in its day. In the stage directions Maggie rises and takes control, leaving John to sink into a chair.

Her tone is forceful and uncharacteristic for a woman. We wull be happy! she declares and there is no arguing with her.

Maggie later apologises for humiliating John by exposing her husband’s sexual appetite, but she still remains resolute – I can manage him.. she repeats like a mantra at the end of the play, before she envisages her positive future - Four rooms… an a park forbye!

She repeats the expression four rooms three times as if to highlight the space she will have to be free, unrestricted by the control of her husband.

**Conflict**

The social deprivation and gender issues lead to many tensions in the play. Initially we see conflict between the sisters, Maggie and Lily, in the way that they regard men. They comment on each other’s circumstances in Act I:

Maggie: servin dirty hulkin brutes a men in a Coocaddens pub.

Lily: Livin in a slum and slaving efter a uselees man an his greetin weans.
Maggie does not like men who drink in the pub.

The dialogue here neatly juxtaposes the two lives, highlighting their differing viewpoints.

Maggie’s disapproval is conveyed by the phrase ‘hulkin brutes’, which suggests the men in the pub are ugly and bestial. Lily describes Maggie’s household as a slum, implying it is run down and unfit for habitation, slavin also suggests the thankless work Maggie puts in. However, the tension here is borne out of concern.

Lily loves her sister and she wants to see her better off. It is significant therefore, that she is present in the final scene when Maggie finally asserts her control.

The conflicting attitudes between the generations are also displayed. When we first meet Jenny she is rebelling and fighting for a better chance at life.

Her slutish attire, liberal behaviour and lack of ‘duty’ towards her family shocks her parents, particularly her father, and an intense conflict ensues.

Jenny is John’s favourite and he can’t stand to see her play the role of the teenage delinquent. What makes him even more angry, however, is the guilt he feels at not having provided for his daughter as he should have. Jenny knows this:

Ye needna worry! When I leave this rotten pig-sty I’m no comin back. There’s ither things in life – so ye’d better hang an tae yer job this time. If ye can!

John cannot handle this forceful attack on his pride, so he hits her. The stage directions describe the two facing each other in frozen silence, which conveys their shock at John’s violence, but also a sense of the determination on both sides not to back down.

This tension lasts until the end of the play where there’s a glimmer of reconciliation when Jenny takes her father’s hand and holds it in an act of contrition.

Another physical conflict in the play takes place between Alec and Isa. Their relationship is a destructive one. Isa is fed up with her husband and Alec follows her around dog-like.

Due to Alec’s feeble character, his frustrations are repressed until they reach breaking point. After being provoked by her threat to leave him for another man, he attacks Isa - You say Peter Robb tae me again an I’ll kill ye! I wull! I’ll kill ye! Alec’s weak nature prevents him from causing Isa any real harm, but his violent temperament is clear.

Finally, there is a metaphorical battle that takes place between the characters and the harshness of their predicament. Each day is a struggle and can only be taken one day at a time.

Fighting against disease and hardship is the priority of many of the characters who are forced to look out for themselves:

- The neighbours scavenge from Maggie
- Granny won’t go to bed without her tea
- the children take the chips as soon as they’re on the table
- Lizzie tries to steal from Maggie
- Isa gets rid of Alec
- Alec uses playacting to win sympathy from his mother

Only Lily, John and Maggie do not put their own needs first, especially Maggie. Instead she acts as a mother fighting for all of them until, in the closing scene of the play, she finally fights for herself.
Style

Speech

It is important to remember that Men Should Weep is a play. Unlike prose or poetry it was not written to be read but to be performed on a stage.

To appreciate the play fully it should be considered from the point of view of the audience, with stage craft considered as well as writing.

Stewart uses a range of techniques to engage the audience and to develop important aspects such as character and theme.

Dialogue

It is through dialogue that Stewart reveals most about her characters.

Consider the following taken from Alec and Isa’s first argument in Act II, Scene 2:

Isa: Fancy me mairryin a rat like you. The joke wis on me a right.

Alec: Isa, I’ll hae plenty again, you’ll see…I’ve a coupla pals that’s got ideas…wait on, Isa! I’ll get ye onythin ye want…a fur coat an crockydile shoes – ye said ye wanted crockydile shoes – I proamise, Isa! I proamise!...

Firstly, Isa refers to Alec as a rat, which alerts the audience to Isa’s poor opinion of her husband. Alec’s response reveals a lot about his character and Isa’s. His use of ellipsis suggests his ideas are fragmented as if he is only now piecing together what he is going to do.

It could also evoke the sense that he is following her around the room, trying to make her stay, and this breaks up his speech. This conveys his sheer obsession with her and dependency on her.

He then lists the things he’ll get for her. Again this illustrates his deferential character but also tells us about Isa.

Did she just marry a man in order to be looked after and given gifts? Is she just using him? When we consider her actions later in the play, we realise these conclusions are justified.

There are many other incidents throughout the play where conclusions can be drawn about characters from what they say. Several of these are examined in the other chapters.

Dialect and Scots

Stewart’s use of dialect gives the voices of the play an authenticity, which adds to the poignancy and impact of the Morrison family’s plight.
For example the household is often referred to as a midden – the Scots for rubbish dump, and Maggie talks about reddin up the place which is again Scots for tidying up.

These words provide us with a social document, giving us a much more immediate experience of life in an East End tenement in the 1930s.

When John gives Maggie the red hat, he delays it with a rhymievy-nievy-nick-knack, which haun will ye tak? which evocatively conjures up the childlike enthusiasm and delight he has for giving Maggie this gift.

Later when John tears the ticket off the hat, Maggie calls him a great muckle ham-fist. This displays the humour and warmth between them. Overall the language is animated and lively, reflecting the play’s spirited protagonists.

**Humour**

Stewart uses humour frequently in the play to add relief and to show the resilience of the characters enduring such social conditions. Granny often provides humour – we see her sucking sweeties and singing, which is almost caricatural.

We therefore feel sympathy for her when she is shunted around with her bed from Maggie to Lizzie – especially when Lizzie is only concerned with her pension book.

Early in Act III, there are comic moments to establish the upbeat atmosphere now that John has found work. Ernest is listening to jazz music. This annoys Maggie, who says the musician has clean lost control.

Ernest explains improvisation as Louis Armstrong daein a sort o turn to which Maggie replies Well, you dae a turn for me, son – wi yon knob. Her amusing way of asking to turn it off makes this scene a light-hearted one. It contrasts with the intense scene of Maggie’s breakdown which precedes it.

**Structure**

It is important to be aware of the sequence of events and what effect that has on our appreciation of the text.

There are often climaxes at the end of Acts:
- in Act I John hits Jenny
- in Act II Maggie breaks down
- in Act III, Maggie asserts herself as head of the house

Within the Acts, different scenes are deliberately juxtaposed.

In Act I, Scene 2, we see Alec and Isa’s dysfunctional relationship and Alec’s drunkenness before we are presented with the positive interaction between John and Maggie. This highlights the strong bond between the parents.

It also alerts us to what the situation could have been, had John kept drinking.
We also must look at the events of Act II, Scene 1 as crucial in prompting Maggie’s hysteria in the next scene.

Bit by bit they build up to Maggie's collapse - Maggie returns from the hospital without Bertie who has TB, then Jenny departs and John despairs.

**Stage set and stage directions**

Stewart gives us significant details about the setting and characters’ actions in the stage directions. We note the social conditions of the tenement setting and see the set change as the Morrisons gain a little more money in Act III.

The stage directions also contribute to the characterisation. We see that Maggie when fraught or perturbed runs her fingers through her hair.

As soon as John is reminded of his unemployed status, he loses confidence and we see him drop and slump down in a chair, as if he (or namely his masculinity) has been physically wounded.

Alec is often panicking or being violent towards Isa, while Jenny is described early in the play as having her nose in the air as she fights to be free.

In Act III, irony is created when we are told in the stage directions that the band outside is playing O Come All Ye Faithful, just as Isa enters to pack her case to leave Alec for another man.

Moreover, Maggie’s final words of the play, when she describes her future, are uttered very softly. This implies that if she spoke too loudly it might somehow damage or prevent her dream from coming true.

She is tentative because this has never been her reality – only a whisper of something make-believe from long-ago. These details develop characters and enrich our understanding of the play, so they must not be overlooked.

**Symbolism**

There are moments and objects in the play that we can consider in a symbolic light. At the end of Act I, we see John, after his argument with Jenny, looking out into the night smoking a fag-end.

We can look on this as representative of his faltering relationship with his daughter. He is staring into darkness metaphorically as he tries to understand her. Smoking the fag-end could symbolise the fact that he is trying to resuscitate a connection with Jenny that is no longer there. It could also portray his fading motivation, waiting for so long without employment.

In addition, Jenny arrives at the end of the play like the fairy wi a magic wand from the top of the Christmas tree that they have all been praying for. Christmas itself, the setting at the end of the play, is a time of hope and redemption.
The red hat

In Act III, John buys Maggie a red hat for Christmas and she is thrilled with it. This hat reminds Maggie of her coortin days because she used to wear a red hat when she went out with John. Therefore, it comes to represent her youth and the best days before she became John’s wife.

It is also significant that Granny, Lily and the neighbours disapprove of it. Granny says its nae a colour for an aul wife. Lily damn it with faint praise - Oh. Quite nice. Maggie, however, likes it and wears it to go out with Lily.

We could argue that its very unconventionality is its significance. It can be linked with Maggie’s growing strength and spirit as well as with the same promiscuous behaviour that we saw in Jenny.

Maggie wears it regardless of etiquette and tradition, in the same way that she defies convention at the end of the play.

Imagery

Stewart rarely uses imagery in this play, as she is more concerned with the authenticity of the different voices within it. However, there is a significant example in Act III, when Jenny describes what she has been through and why she comes home. She describes an image of a river:

(more to herself than the others) there wis lights shimmerin on the blackness…it kind o slinks alang slow, a river, in the night. I was meanin tae let it tak me alang wi it.

The physical sense of her standing looking into the river, contemplating suicide is conveyed here, but there is also a metaphorical nuance where the river comes to portray depression and despair - always there in the darkness.

The use of the word slinks gives it an ominous overtone, as if it is sly and cunning in its method to lure you in. Moreover, the parenthetical a river emphasises the feeling of isolation conveyed in these lines. Jenny says poignantly that within this blackness she sees her daddy’s face. It is this that gives her comfort and courage to keep going and to return. He is the one hope that pulls her out of the abyss.