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A blurred background image of a film reel and a strip of film. The reel is positioned in the upper right, and a strip of film extends from it towards the bottom center. The overall tone is light and artistic.

PART I

Introduction to Drama

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...

—*William Shakespeare*

What attracts me to drama is that it is, in the most obvious ways, what all the arts are, upon a last analysis.

—*William Butler Yeats*

That is why we must have a theatre, for above all, the theatre places man in the center of the world. We must have a point of adventurous stillness, the quiet eye of the storm, from which to witness the age old revelation of a man challenging God in the working out of his fate.

—*Arthur Miller*

A play is written to be performed on a stage before an audience. The audience is a group of people collected together in the same place at the same time for the purpose of sharing the experience of the theatre. Man needs to mingle his individual experiences with others, in which he functions as a part of a large body.

A drama is a work of literature or a composition which delineates life and human activity by means of presenting various actions of, and dialogues between a group of characters. And it is designed for theatrical presentation. We speak of a drama as a literary work or a composition, but we must never forget that drama is designed to be acted on the stage. So every play has two manifestations: it is a literary work, an order of words on a page to be read, and it is a performance, an order of speeches and visual effects presented on a stage.

We study drama in order to learn what meaning others have made of life, to comprehend what it takes to produce a work of art, and to glean some understanding of ourselves. Drama produces in a separate, aesthetic world, a moment of being for the audience to experience, while maintaining the detachment of a reflective observer.

Drama is a representational art, a visible and audible narrative presenting virtual, fictional characters within a virtual, fictional universe. Dramatic realizations may pretend to approximate reality or else stubbornly defy, distort, and deform reality into an artistic statement. Theatre is art, and art's appeal lies in its ability both to approximate life and to depart from it. By presenting its distorted version of life to our consciousness, art gives us a new perspective and appreciation of reality. Although, to some extent, all aesthetic experiences perform this service, theatre does it most effectively by creating a separate, cohesive universe that freely acknowledges its status as an art form.

A play script is an open text. The reader of a dramatic text or script is not limited by either the specific interpretation of a given production or by the unstoppable action of a moving spectacle. The reader of a dramatic text may discover the nuances of the play's language, structure, and events at their own pace. Yet studied alone, the author's

blueprint for artistic production does not tell the whole story of a play's life and significance. One also needs to assess the play's critical reviews to discover how it resonated to cultural themes at the time of its debut and how the shifting tides of cultural interest have revised its interpretation and impact on audiences. And to do this, one needs to know a little about the culture of the times which produced the play as well as the author who penned it.

Of the three major forms of imaginative literature—fiction, drama and poetry—it is with drama that people are most familiar. Nearly everyone has seen scores of movies and television plays. Like poetry and fiction, drama has its own principles. One essential ingredient of drama is conflict. The conflict may take any one of several forms: a wrong to be righted, a misunderstanding to be cleared up, a problem to be solved, a moral dilemma to be resolved, an enemy to be overcome, a woman to be won—all of which involve a character facing choices and making decisions, that is, taking action of some sort. Action, then, is necessary. It may be physical action or it may be mental action. Action is rendered in speech, but it is speech that gets somewhere, that contributes to the development or settlement of the conflict. Talk by itself is not enough; it must advance the action.

This requirement, as well as several others, results from the conditions that are peculiar to a play and so distinguish it from fiction. A play is written to be acted, not to be told. Its point of view is necessarily objective. It must be presented in a limited time, usually under three hours. It normally appeals to a wide audience, and the assumption is that it will not be re-examined like a novel; rather, it is a “one-shot” performance. These conditions impose restrictions on drama.

A play, like fiction, makes a progress from beginning, through middle, to end, or from exposition, through complication, to resolution of denouement. But the nature of drama requires the progress to be more rapid and freer of interruptions than it often is in fiction. Also, it is usually clearer. Divisions into acts and scenes, serving to block out the action in functional units, allow us to pause and take stock of the situation, to

look back and forward to see where the characters stand in relation to the problem they face.

The exposition performs several functions at once. It sets the action in time and place and makes us acquainted with the characters; it reveals the situation they are in, initiates the conflict to be developed, and it may introduce foreshadowing to hint at the resolution. All these must be done clearly and quickly.

The complication, or the middle part of the play, develops the conflict initiated by the exposition. Between the protagonist and his goal are placed obstacles which he must overcome; misunderstandings are generated; problems or questions are debated. The central portion of the play enables us to get to know the characters more thoroughly.

Ideally the denouement arises logically from the exposition and complication. The point separating the “rising action” and “falling action” is usually called the climax, or turning point, or reversal. It is the point which marks the crucial shift in the character’s fortunes, or, the point at which it becomes quite apparent what direction the plot will take.

When a play tells a single story through a well-knit plot, a plot composed of events logically related and strictly relevant to the main concern, it has unity of action. Ever since it was first mentioned by Aristotle, this dramatic ideal has been honored by playwrights, but not by all of them. The Elizabethan dramatists, for instance, liked to introduce subordinate lines of action in a play to provide variety and hence to widen the play’s appeal. When a subplot provides a structural or thematic parallel to the main action, we feel that variety is achieved without real loss of unity.

Another way a dramatist can give unity to a play is to represent the action as occurring at a single place and at a single time. Aristotle felt that unity of action was indispensable to a play. Assuming that the action of a play is restricted to one place, what can setting do for a play? It can economically reveal characters; it can influence the actions of characters; it can provide atmosphere and it can suggest ideas. However, it should be remembered that what the writer of fiction describes in words is now

portrayed on a stage with actual objects or representations of objects, a notable economy for the dramatist, since a glance takes in the stage set. Since a set can do so much for a play, a producer would devote much care to its creation. On the other hand, it is possible for a set to be too elaborate, and so to detract other elements in the play. Some modern producers prefer to keep their sets simple and unobtrusive so that attention is focused on the characters and their delivery of the playwright's words.

A chief question we ask in studying character in drama is: What kind of person is the playwright presenting? What function does he perform in the play and what exactly does he contribute to the play? In a word, it is important to determine a character's function as well as his nature.

One kind of character that helps dramatic projection is a foil, or a character who, standing in contrast to another character, helps to define him. He can be a minor character, whose only function is to serve as a foil; or he may play a major part in the action and serve as foil somewhat incidentally.

The type character is also used because he can be quickly and clearly portrayed. He is the representative of a country, an occupation, and a manner of life. Type characters have been widely used since the days of Roman comedy.

A play tends to show static rather than developing characters, again because of the limited time at its disposal. Circumstances may make the actions of a character at the end of the play different from what they were at the beginning, but usually his basic nature will be the same throughout. However we often find exceptions, such as Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Macbeth*.

When we study drama, dialogue has to be taken into consideration. In theory dialogue is not indispensable to drama and normally it is a major ingredient. Dialogue must advance the action. It is not difficult to put characters together and make them talk and talk interestingly, but the dramatist must see to it that the talk leads somewhere. It reveals what has happened before the period of time represented by the play; it reveals what is happening during that period but happening offstage; and it reveals the

thoughts and feelings of the characters on the stage. On the basis of this information a character will act or will suffer a change of heart or mind that promises future action.

In talking, the characters reveal themselves. The speech of the several characters must be sharply distinguished so that we can clearly infer their characters from what they say and how they say it. One can make an interesting character study of the leading figures in a play simply on the basis of the way they speak.

If we want to read a play properly or judge it fairly, we also should know something about the types of plays. The word “tragedy” was first used by the Greeks to describe a certain type of play. This word came to be applied to a situation in life in which the protagonist suffered misfortune or death. A tragedy is fundamentally a serious play which presents a character in many ways admirable but he faces a moral issue. The issue is not only peculiar to him but is one any man might have to face—a universal issue. The forces of life being what they are and human nature being what it is, the protagonist will wrestle with these forces, but he cannot hope to win over them, and ultimately he is defeated. A play that engages our interest in such basic, serious questions must deal with us honestly. The character must be richly developed. The audience must feel that the protagonist’s fate is necessary, inexorable and not to be escaped. Our realization that the protagonist, thus caught, is the victim of a superior force arouses our pity, and our realization that the action demonstrates a universal truth makes us believe that the victim could just easily be ourselves.

The nature of tragic hero and the nature of the conflict he is engaged in have changed as man’s ideas about himself and his world have changed. The Greek tragic hero is a man of high estate, of royal or noble position. He or his forebears have transgressed the moral law, embodied in the gods and the state, and the play shows him struggling to avoid the consequences of the transgression. His conflict is with forces outside himself, and he is inevitably the loser in the struggle. The Elizabethan tragic hero is also an eminent man, but his conflict is usually within himself. Plays of the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen come as close as any in more modern

times to fulfilling the requirements of tragedy. They are quite different from earlier tragedies. The hero is from the middle classes and his conflict is usually of a domestic or social nature. The plays are usually concerned primarily with exploring some of the personal and social problems of the modern man.

A comedy is a play that has a happy ending. However, it is difficult to isolate any feature common to all comedies because the term “comedy” is applied to many different kinds of plays. Comedy often pictures life accurately and with shrewd insight but it does not picture it profoundly. It might show how amusing, how foolish, how illogical, people are but it does not go beyond this and try, as tragedy does, to explain things basic and profound about the nature of man. We should not say that comedy is inferior to tragedy. It is a different genre and each genre has its own value and should be appreciated for what it is.

In melodrama, as in tragedy, the hero is engaged in a serious difficulty, sometimes a life and death struggle, but in melodrama he usually wins. The situation of melodrama may closely resemble that of tragedy and so may the characters and actions. What distinguishes melodrama from tragedy is that it seeks to interest the audience for its own sake. The action is exciting, full of thrills. There is no need for subtleties of character, or motive, or theme, all of which must be kept plain and simple to clear the decks for swift action.

Farce is related to comedy as melodrama is to tragedy. Farce is concerned with the ludicrous, the preposterous, with ridiculous misunderstandings and mix-ups, to say nothing of pie-throwing and many forms of horseplay. In farce, character counts for next to nothing, and motive is almost nonexistent. Melodrama and farce are less meaningful and less valuable as commentary on life, and aesthetically they are exceedingly simple. But they have their own value and they make their own appeal.

Drama is unique among the major forms of imaginative literature in that it is written to be produced. The text of the play is all-important, but before it can fully realize the intention of the playwright, it must be turned into a performance. We cannot ignore matters of the production of a play.

Particularly in reading older plays we should know something about how they were produced in their time. Knowledge like this helps us to visualize the action as the playwright conceived it. It also helps us to understand the features of a play that were determined by conditions of production. We need to note these conditions not in order to study the art of the theatre, but simply to enable us to read the plays intelligently. One should realize that his understanding and appreciation of the plays of any age will be greatly enhanced if he acquaints himself with the theatrical conditions.