

## Chapter six

### Elements of Drama

Most successful playwrights follow the theories of playwriting and drama that were established over two thousand years ago by a man named Aristotle. In his works the Poetics Aristotle outlined the six elements of drama in his critical analysis of the classical Greek tragedy Oedipus Rex written by the Greek playwright, Sophocles, in the fifth century B.C. The six elements as they are outlined involve: **Thought/Theme/Ideas; Action or Plot; Characters; Language; Music; and Spectacle.**

#### 1. Thought/Theme/Ideas

What the play means as opposed to what happens (the plot). Sometimes the theme is clearly stated in the title. It may be stated through dialogue by a character acting as the playwright's voice. Or it may be the theme is less obvious and emerges only after some study or thought. The abstract issues and feelings that grow out of the dramatic action.

#### 2. Action/Plot

The events of a play; the story as opposed to the theme; what happens rather than what it means. The plot must have some sort of unity and clarity by setting up a pattern by which each action initiating the next rather than standing alone without connection to what came before it or what follows. In the plot of a play, characters are involved in conflict that has a pattern of movement. The action and movement in the play begins from the initial entanglement, through rising action, climax, and falling action to resolution.

Plot is the structure of the play's action, or it denotes the order in which the incidents in a play are organized or arranged. It is the author's arrangement of incidents in the play that gives the story a particular focus and emphasis. Plot involves more than what happens and shapes actions. It involves how and why things happen. Dramatic plot is similar to the plot of fiction. It has five basic stages: exposition, complication, crisis (turning point or climax), falling action and resolution (denouement).

**Exposition** refers to the beginning of dramatic plot. It provides background information, describes the setting and introduces the characters. **Complication** refers to the beginning and intensification of dramatic conflict. **Crisis** indicates the point of greatest tension, which comes into being as a result of intensified action in the conflict. **Falling action** refers to the stage in the development of the plot where the play's complications are being sorted out. **Resolution** refers to the part in which the complication is resolved.

#### 2. Character

These are the people presented in the play that are involved in the perusing plot. Each character should have their own distinct personality, age, appearance, beliefs, socio economic background, and language.

Characters in drama are imaginary people that a playwright creates. They are called **dramatis personae** (meaning invented persons of the dramatic world) because of this imaginative creation. These have human qualities that appeal to the audience/ the reader. The element of character is closely related to the element of plot in that the play's plot develops as a result of the interaction between characters. The idea of characters' interaction leads to the issue of dialogue.

*The cast of characters is listed at the beginning of a play. Sometimes the cast list includes a brief description of one or more characters. In other cases, the playwright may briefly describe a character when s/he first appears in the play. You also learn about characters through their actions and through their words.*

### 3. Dialogue

Dialogue is inextricably linked to the conversation (talk) that takes place between characters. It refers to what characters say to each other. Ezra Pound, the modern American poet, described drama as, "persons moving about on a stage using words."

Dialogue is a basic element of drama because it reveals characters and paves the way for action. By revealing character is meant that what characters say throws light on their personality and hence enables the audience/reader to evaluate them. The notion of paving the way for action shows the close link between dialogue and plot in drama. This is to say that by paving the way for action, dramatic dialogue moves the plot of a play forward. The text of a play consists largely of dialogue, or conversation between the characters. Most of the plot and characterization in a play is revealed through the dialogue.

### 4. Language

The word choices made by the playwright and the enunciation of the actors of the language. Language and dialog delivered by the characters moves the plot and action along, provides exposition, and defines the distinct characters. Each playwright can create their own specific style in relationship to language choices they use in establishing character and dialogue.

### 5. Music

Music can encompass the rhythm of dialogue and speeches in a play or can also mean the aspects of the melody and music compositions as with musical theatre. Each theatrical presentation delivers music, rhythm and melody in its own distinctive manner. Music is not a part of every play. But, music can be included to mean all sounds in a production. Music can expand to all sound effects, the actor's voices, songs, and instrumental music played as underscore in a play. Music creates patterns and establishes tempo in theatre. In the aspects of the musical the songs are used to push the plot forward and move the story to a higher level of intensity. Composers and lyricist work together with playwrights to strengthen the themes and ideas of the play. Character's wants and desires can be strengthened for the audience through lyrics and music.

## 6. Spectacle/Staging

The spectacle in the theatre can involve all of the aspects of scenery, costumes, and special effects in a production. The visual elements of the play created for theatrical event. The qualities determined by the playwright that create the world and atmosphere of the play for the audience's eye.

Staging refers to the various features that a play presents when it is performed on the stage. In other words, staging refers to the visual aspects of a play. Staging includes characters' positions, gestures, and movements on the stage, costumes, lighting, sound effects, scenic background, props (portable pieces of scenery), etc.

## 2.5. Reading and Analyzing Dramatic texts

### HOW TO UNDERSTAND DRAMA

It is clear from our brief survey of the history of drama that drama is written to be spoken. We know nothing about the characters except what we are told about them. That is, there is no narration or description in drama. Thus, the playwright automatically must present his ideas and his pictures of the characters almost entirely through dialogue and action. The audience, therefore, can directly observe the ways in which characters are influenced and changed by events and by other characters. However, in a certain way, drama has much in common with the other genres of literature. As with fiction, drama focuses on one or a few major characters that enjoy success or endure failure as they face challenges and deal with other characters. In view of that, to be able to understand drama, it must be read eventually. Due to its specific characteristics, some suggestions are given to have a better understanding in a play.

#### A. How Do You Read A Play?

As the nature of drama is quite different from that of fiction or poetry, to read it, of course, needs special awareness. Hence, to understand the meaning embedded in drama, you should stick to the following steps:

##### 1. Listen to the lines!

It means that you should read the dialogue as you would expect to hear it spoken. Thus, you need to be able to imagine in what kind of intonation the sentence is spoken.

This is one fine example to be discussed:

"Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to live you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be..." (Ibsen' *Doll's House*)

Can you detect the mixture of tenderness & regret in these words?

##### 2. Visualize the scene!

Meaning that you need to picture in your mind what the stage looks like so that you can grasp the important details related to, for example, the setting of the play. In so doing, you will be able to get more obvious images about what happens in the play. Here, you need to explore your imagination as much as possible. For example, In Tennessee William's *Street Car Named Desire*, you can imagine how

most scenes describe rooms in a cheap apartment in a slum area, or in Childress' Florence you can imagine how the scenes happen in a railway station's waiting room.

### **3. Envision the action!**

In understanding a drama text you also need to observe the stage direction and pay attention to the importance of movement, gesture, and setting in the performance of a play. Thus, you need to take notice of the stage direction in the text.

### **B. How to make intonation happen correctly?**

Giving the right intonation when you read a dialogue or a sentence in a drama text is a way of interpreting it. In so doing, you must get involved in the situation and understand exactly what is happening in the text. Therefore, you can ask the following questions to yourself:

- Why do I say this line?
- What do I expect the other person to do when I say this line?
- How will the other person react?
- What is my feeling in this situation?
- What is my emotion?

If you can answer those questions and, thus, know exactly what you are doing and why you are saying the line, stress will eventually hit in the right place.

## **HOW TO ANALYZE DRAMA**

There are important things need to be done previously in analyzing drama that is defining the play and describing its elements. By doing this one can really grasp the core idea related to what is really happening in the play.

### **A. Defining the Play**

As there are many different kinds of drama, it is only logical that we begin our analysis of a play with an extended definition. This does not simply mean to say that we point out that the play is a comedy or a tragedy, but rather that we attempt to describe accurately the particular world of a particular play. We should try to think of all the dimensions of any drama and then briefly describe the way these dimensions are discovered in a particular drama. In defining a play we can do the following.

#### **1. Describing the World of Drama**

This is the most essential task of a student in a drama class: to explain and describe the world of the play. We can take Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Death of a Salesman*, and begin our definition of the play by mentioning that it is a dark drama which illustrates the despair of an unsuccessful human being. From beginning to end, Miller takes the audience into a very somber world possessed by the main character Willy Loman. As Loman relives his life constantly, he almost ceases to live at all, and his final suicide only magnifies the kind of lifeless world in which he has lived. Thus, we can say that the world of the play is dark and dreary: there is much anxiety and little hope. Miller has presented a world intentionally miserable and unsatisfying, and at the same time meaningful.

## **2. Describing the Kind of Play**

We have to recognize the importance of placing a play in the generic sense. It is important to explain in the beginning of any analysis that the play does belong to the type known as this or that. Then we may even want to note that the play accordingly makes use of certain conventions common to this kind of play. For example, if it is a heroic play we can notice that the hero is typically a great lover and warrior, and like so many heroes of heroic plays is torn between love and duty. In other words, the process of defining the play- which is how every analysis of every play should start- is aided by reference to the kind of play and the conventions of that kind of play. In this case we can also note the expected conventions of it and the extent to which the playwright makes use of them.

## **3. Describing the Physical World of the Play**

It would be pointless to enter immediately into a discussion of the play without some brief explanation of the physical world in which it takes place. This means, first of all, explaining the location. Where does the action take place? Do we move from one part of the world to another as in *Antony and Cleopatra* or do we stay in one home almost the whole time as in *Death of a Salesman*? If the location has some symbolic or historical significance, this should be explained at the beginning.

Furthermore, we also need to denote the time of day. What is the length of the play? Are there intervals of time between scenes? Acts? Does the whole play take place in the classically specified twenty-four-hour period?

In so doing, by placing the play in time and space, we are clarifying the larger world with which the playwright is concerned, that is, the world of action and character. If we did not comment on the location and the passage of time of the play, we would assume too much in our reading.

## **B. Describing the Elements of Drama**

The major literary aspects of drama are the text, language, characters, plot, structure, point of view, tone, symbolism, and theme or meaning. In analyzing drama we need to understand each of these. Thus, you can determine, for example, one dominating idea embedded in the play; find out the major as well as the minor characters, their roles, and the relationships among them; reveal some sort of correlation between the action and the theme by asking, for example why certain events are more important than others; discover how diction, figurative language, imagery patterns, and even logic are used in the play. Symbolism can also be significant ideas when analyzing dramas as symbolism may give us the core meaning of the story or determine our deep understanding of it. Each of the elements of drama will be described further in the next chapter.

**A MATTER OF HUSBANDS**

*a play in one-act*

**by Ferenc Molnar**

**translated by Benjamin Glazer**

The following one-act play is reprinted from *Ten Minute Plays*. Ed. Pierre Loving. New York: Brentano's, 1923. It is now in the public domain and may therefore be performed without royalties.

**CHARACTERS**

**Famous Actress**

**Earnest Young Woman**

*[The scene is a drawing room, but a screen, a sofa and a chair will do, provided that the design and colorings are exotic and suggestive of the apartment of the famous Hungarian actress in which this dialogue takes place. The time is late afternoon, and when the curtain rises the Earnest Young Woman is discovered, poised nervously on the edge of a gilt chair. It is plain she has been sitting there a long time. For perhaps the fiftieth time she is studying the furnishings of the room and regarding the curtained door with a glance that would be impatient if it were not so palpably frightened. And now and then she licks her lips as if her mouth was dry. She is dressed in a very modest frock and wears her hat and furs. At last the Famous Actress enters through the curtained door at the right which leads to her boudoir.]*

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** You wished to see me?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** *[She gulps emotionally]* Yes.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** What can I do for you?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** *[Extends her arms in a beseeching gesture]* Give me back my husband!

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Give you back your husband!

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Yes. *[The FAMOUS ACTRESS only stares at her in speechless bewilderment.]* You are wondering which one he is.... He is a blond man, not very tall, wears spectacles. He is a lawyer, your manager's lawyer. Alfred is his first name.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Oh! I have met him--yes.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** I know you have. I implore you, give him back to me.

*[There is a long pause.]*

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** You mustn't mistake my silence for embarrassment. I am at a loss because--I don't quite see how I can give you back your husband when I haven't got him to give.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** You just admitted that you knew him.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** That scarcely implies that I have taken him from you. Of course I know him. He drew up my last contract. And it seems to me I have seen him once or twice since then--backstage. A rather nice-spoken, fair-haired man. Did you say he wore spectacles?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Yes.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** I don't remember him with spectacles.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** He probably took them off. He wanted to look his best to you. He is in love with you. He never takes them off when I'm around. He doesn't care how he looks when I'm around. He doesn't love me. I implore you, give him back to me!

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** If you weren't such a very foolish young woman I should be very angry with you. Wherever did you get the idea that I have taken your husband from you?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** He sends you flowers all the time.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** That's not true.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** It is!

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** It isn't. He never sent me a flower in all his life. Did he tell you he did?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** No. I found out at the florist's. The flowers are sent to your dressing room twice a week and charged to him.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** That's a lie.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Do you mean to say that *I* am lying?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** I mean to say that *someone* is lying to you.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** [*Fumbles in her bag for a letter*] And what about this letter?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Letter?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** He wrote it to you. And he said--

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** He wrote it to me? Let me see.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** No. I'll read it to you. [*She opens it and reads mournfully*] "My darling, Shan't be able to call for you at the theater tonight. Urgent business. A thousand apologies. Ten thousand kisses. Alfred."

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Oh!

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** I found it on his desk this morning. He probably intended to send it to the theater by messenger. But he forgot it. And I opened it. [*She weeps.*]

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** You mustn't cry.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** [*Sobbing*] Why mustn't I? You steal my husband and I mustn't cry! Oh, I know how little it means to you. And how easy it is for you. One night you dress like a royal princess, and the next night you undress like a Greek goddess. You blacken your eyebrows and redden your lips and wax your lashes and paint your face. You have cosmetics and bright lights to make you seem beautiful. An author's lines to make you seem witty and wise. No wonder a poor, simple-minded lawyer falls in love with you. What chance have I against you in my cheap little frock, my own lips and eyebrows, my own unstudied ways? I don't know how to strut and pose and lure a man. I haven't got Mr. Shakespeare to write beautiful speeches for me. In reality you may be more stupid than I am, but I admit that when it comes to alluring men I am no match for you.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** [*Without anger, slowly, regards her appraisingly*] This is a very interesting case.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** What is?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Yours.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Mine? What do you mean?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** I mean that I never received a flower, or a letter, or anything else from your husband. Tell me, haven't you and your husband been getting on rather badly of late?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Yes, of course.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** You used to be very affectionate to each other?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Why, yes.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** And of late you have been quite cold?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Yes.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Of course! A typical case.... My dear, if you knew how often we actresses meet this sort of thing! It is perfectly clear that your husband has been playing a little comedy to make you jealous, to revive your interest in him.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** [*Dumbfounded, staring*] Do you really think that? Do you mean to say such a thing has happened to you before?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Endless times. It happens to every actress who is moderately pretty and successful. It is one of the oldest expedients in the world, and we actresses are such conspicuous targets for it! There is scarcely a man connected with the theater who doesn't make use of us in that way some time or another-- authors, composers, scene designers, lawyers, orchestra leaders, even the managers themselves. To regain a wife or sweetheart's affections all they need to do is invent a love affair with one of us. The wife is always so ready to believe it. Usually we don't know a thing about it. But even when it is brought to our notice we don't mind so much. At least we have the consolation of knowing that we are the means of making many a marriage happy which might otherwise have ended in the divorce court.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** But how--how could I know?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** *[With a gracious little laugh]* There, dear, you mustn't apologize. You couldn't know, of course. It seems so plausible. You fancy your husband in an atmosphere of perpetual temptation, in a backstage world full of beautiful sirens without scruples or morals. One actress, you suppose, is more dangerous than a hundred ordinary women. You hate us and fear us. None understands that better than your husband, who is evidently a very cunning lawyer. And so he plays on your fear and jealousy to regain the love you deny him. He writes a letter and leaves it behind him on the desk. Trust a lawyer never to do that unintentionally. He orders flowers for me by telephone in the morning and probably cancels the order the moment he reaches his office. By the way, hasn't he a lock of my hair?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Yes. In his desk drawer. I brought it with me.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Yes. They bribe my hair-dresser to steal from me. It is a wonder I have any hair left at all.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** *[Happily]* Is that how he got it?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** I can't imagine how else. Tell me, hasn't he left any of my love letters lying around?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** *[In alarm]* No.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Don't be alarmed. I haven't written him any.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Then what made you--?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** I might have if he had come to me frankly and said: "I say, Sara, will you do something for me? My wife and I aren't getting on so well. Would you write me a passionate love letter that I can leave lying around at home where she may find it?" I should certainly have done it for him. I'd have written a letter that would have made you weep into your pillow for a fortnight. I wrote ten like that for a very eminent playwright once. But he had no luck with them. His wife was such a proper person she returned them all to him unread.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** How clever you are! How good!

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** I'm neither better nor worse than any other girl in the theater. Even though you do consider us such monsters.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** *[Contritely]* I have been a perfect fool.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Well, you do look a bit silly, standing there with tears in your eyes, and your face flushed with happiness because you have discovered that a little blond man with spectacles loves you, after all. My dear, no man deserves to be adored as much as that. But then it's your own affair, isn't it?

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** Yes.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Yet I want to give you a parting bit of advice: don't let him fool you like this again.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** He won't. Never fear!

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** No matter what you may find in his pockets--letters, handkerchiefs, my photograph, no matter what flowers he sends, or letters he writes, or appointments he makes--don't be taken in a second time.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** You may be sure of that. And you won't say anything to him about my coming here, will you?

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Not a word. I'm angry with him for not having come to me frankly for permission to use my name the way he did.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** You are a dear, and I don't know how to thank you.

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** Now you mustn't begin crying all over again.

**EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN:** You have made me so happy!

*[She kisses the FAMOUS ACTRESS impetuously, wetting her cheek with tears; then she rushes out. The door closes behind her. There is a pause.]*

**FAMOUS ACTRESS:** *[Goes to the door of her boudoir, calls]* All right, Alfred. You can come in now. She has gone.

THE CURTAIN FALLS