

**HOW TO STUDY
LITERATURE**

How to
Study
Modern
Drama

Kenneth Pickering

HOW TO STUDY MODERN DRAMA

Kenneth Pickering

M
MACMILLAN

© Kenneth Pickering 1988

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended).

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1988

Published by
Higher and Further Education Division
MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Typeset by Wessex Typesetters
(Division of The Eastern Press Ltd)
Frome, Somerset

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Pickering, Kenneth
How to study modern drama.—(How to
study literature).

1. English literature—Study and
teaching 2. Drama—Study and teaching
I. Title II. Series
822'.007 PR625
ISBN 0-333-42864-1

General editors' preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck
Martin Coyle

Acknowledgements

THE author wishes to express grateful thanks to Kevin Wood and the cast of Channel Theatre's production of *The Birthday Party* for many new insights; to Jean and Irene Pickering for their careful work on the manuscript; and to Martin Coyle and John Peck for their seemingly inexhaustible supply of helpful suggestions.

The author and publishers gratefully acknowledge permission to use copyright material granted by the following:

Professor Shelley Frome and the editor of *Speech and Drama*; Jonathan Cape Ltd for extracts from the works of Wesker; Eyre Methuen Ltd for extracts from plays by Harold Pinter, Shelagh Delaney, Bertold Brecht and Henrik Ibsen; Faber and Faber for an extract from *Look Back in Anger*; Penguin Plays for extracts from *Death of a Salesman*.

Contents

<i>General editors' preface</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
1 Introduction	1
2 First reading	7
3 The scene as a unit for study	24
4 Looking at the language of plays	42
5 Tackling different kinds of play	66
6 Practical workshops and drama study	89
7 Characters and themes	112
8 Exams and essays	119
<i>Further reading</i>	129

Introduction

How to use this book

THE aim of this book is to enable you to make a really good job of responding to any modern play that you might encounter as part of a course at school, college or university. Students are often very worried about studying modern plays, either because they are completely baffled as to what a play is about or because they have read or seen a particular play, enjoyed it, but simply cannot think what else to say about it when it comes to analysis. In either case the prospect of writing an essay or examination answer seems daunting.

I should not be writing this book to help you if I did not feel certain that studying modern plays *can* and *should* be one of the most fascinating and enjoyable experiences in the whole field of literature and drama, but I have to admit that there are two particular reasons why it might not appear to be so. Firstly, there are some modern plays which seem utterly incomprehensible when you initially encounter them, and you should never be ashamed to confess that this is the case. Don't be depressed: plenty of sophisticated audiences and critics have at first been totally perplexed by plays that have later established themselves as classics, and one of the many options open to a playwright *is* to mystify the audience. Secondly, we are all now bombarded with drama through television, so that we are likely to consume more modern drama than novels, poetry or earlier drama. Because we watch so many soap operas, domestic comedies, documentary dramas, one-off plays and so on, it is difficult to conceive of 'studying' an art form we take so much for granted.

How, then, *do* we study a modern play, and how can this book help? Almost certainly you will have acquired this book

because you are about to be or already have been set the task of studying a particular play and so are looking for practical guidance on how to come to grips with it. Initially I am going to ask you to consider three questions of a general nature before going on to suggest a number of steps to follow in studying a modern play. The discussion of those three questions will occupy the remainder of this chapter, and if you take the time and trouble to make sure that you have grasped the issues, the rest of the task will be much simpler and *much* more interesting.

After looking at our three questions I shall then go on to suggest a number of steps to take in the study of modern plays. You need to master each stage before going onto the next and so, clearly, we cannot consider all the steps at once. Each step will be applied to examples from well-known plays, but once you have worked through the examples provided you should try the idea out on one of your own set plays. Later in the book we shall be considering other possible ways of approaching play study, and then all the techniques discussed will be brought together to demonstrate how you should tackle an extract, essay or examination question.

As you acquire new skills and insights you should find yourself able to go deeper into a play and growing in confidence as you discover that you are able to make valuable judgements about the material. In particular I am anxious that you will come to 'make sense' of what is really a strange and remarkable ritual: a group of people, with you amongst them, sits in a darkened room and watch another group of people perform in an agreed space. The first group of people, the *audience*, never invades the space of the second group of people, the *cast*, nor do they normally shout out when they are angry, bored or mystified. Indeed, the audience allows the cast to insult them, shock them, amuse them and manipulate their perception in a whole variety of ways. The audience, for example, may agree to imagine that a structure on the stage is a room in someone's house or that a bare stage represents the universe, or that half an hour represents several hours. The cast may speak directly to the audience or appear to pretend that the audience does not exist. This ritual we call 'theatre' is stranger the more you think about it, and modern plays are the product of what playwrights have felt to be appropriate forms of this ritual in recent years. And this leads to our first question.

What is a 'modern' play?

The precise meaning of the term 'modern' varies according to its context. If I were to drive a 1930s car or to wear clothes that were fashionable only ten years ago you certainly wouldn't describe my tastes as modern; yet we usually describe as modern any play written since 1877! In this particular year the great Norwegian dramatist Ibsen turned from writing plays in verse to create a series of plays in everyday language dealing with important social and moral issues. It was the impact of these and similar plays on the European theatre of the late nineteenth century and the rapid spread of their influence to Britain, Russia and the United States of America that began the era of 'modern drama'.

The style of Ibsen's plays is frequently labelled 'naturalistic', and while there have been many departures from naturalism in the modern age it has remained the dominant mode and, for most of us, the most accessible form of theatre. Television has only strengthened the hold of naturalism. Though we shall return to the idea many times, it is important to note here that we generally *expect* a play to be naturalistic; that is, to show us believable people living credible lives and speaking like ourselves. Because naturalistic plays are the most straightforward to deal with, my early examples will be drawn from this kind of play.

Before we leave the question of what is meant by 'modern drama', you must surely be asking whether the fact that certain plays were written after a certain date is sufficient reason for lumping them all together under one heading. Clearly they must have a few other things in common, and three factors are particularly helpful to consider.

First, modern plays all in some way concern the predicament of man living in the age of science and industrialisation. This is a bold statement, and when you have read this book and studied your plays you may wish to challenge it, but you will find that even modern plays which are *set* in earlier periods of history are still inviting the judgements of modern, scientific man.

Secondly, modern plays in some way reflect the remarkable changes in theatre design and technology which occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century and have continued

ever since. Theatres have, of course, always been subject to change, but the rapidity of change in the last hundred years has been unprecedented: it is a period which has seen the invention of the electric light and has now reached a point where through television we can each have our own theatre. Shapes of stages and theatre buildings have been subject to constant experiment, so that playwrights are constantly challenged to rethink their craft. Audiences have also been experimented upon; for example, it is only during the period of modern drama that they have sat in a darkened auditorium. So you must remember that any modern play you are studying was written for a sophisticated yet frequently changing theatre.

Thirdly, you will find that, in comparison with the plays of Shakespeare, modern plays are very much more varied in form. They include some extremely long plays, such as Shaw's *Man and Superman*, but also many short ones, such as the one-act plays by Pinter and the thirty-second play *Breath* by Beckett. To some extent the prevalence of short plays reflects tastes and habits: the pace of modern life generally seems to call for shorter plays; but it also stems from the development of many non-commercial and experimental theatres which may have small numbers of performers but also a greater freedom to try out new ideas. Among modern plays, however, you will find many that conform to the structure of three acts with one or two scenes, a structure often used by Ibsen and his successors; unlike Shakespeare's plays they present a series of episodes of roughly equal length each with its own climax. Studying a modern play includes discovering how its particular structure works, and we need to avoid any idea that there is a 'right' way for a playwright to structure his work.

What is a playtext?

When you are studying any form of drama you must be constantly aware that a 'play' really only exists when it is performed. A playtext, on which most study is centred, is only the complex set of instructions to the performers. Because the bulk of a playtext consists of the words which the cast must speak, and because words are chosen or shaped with great skill, the playtext itself is often mistakenly thought to be simply another literary form like the novel or poetry. Small wonder

that some students find plays difficult to understand, since they have not grasped that the 'meaning' of a play only emerges in the theatre.

• The implication of this is that in studying a play you must recognise that the words spoken by the characters are only one element, and I shall be suggesting ways in which you can interpret the various other indications for performance contained in a playtext. Furthermore, as you study a play you will need to construct an imaginary performance in your mind. This may well cause you problems because you may have such limited experience of the theatre; again there are suggested activities in this book which will help you overcome this factor. Obviously you will need to see the play you are studying performed as often as possible, but this may not be easy and you may well experience a sharp clash between the imaginary performance you have created in your mind and a live performance you may see. None of these problems, however, are insurmountable, and indeed you will find the exploration of various interpretations of a play very stimulating. You can imagine how dull it would be if all performances of a particular piece of music were identical, but, similarly, how absurd it would be to study music without imagining it being played or sung.

In the modern theatre the majority of successful playwrights have been deeply involved in the performance of their plays and, as I have already indicated, this has been a period of rapid change and bold experimentation. Playwrights have conveyed many of their wishes and attitudes concerning the performance of their plays in the published playtexts, so when you begin reading the play (which can be a very enjoyable activity in its own right) remember you are not studying a novel.

What is 'study' in relation to modern drama?

The most likely reason for your having obtained this book is that you are a full-time student required to study plays, but you are not the only kind of person who 'studies' plays, and plays were not written to be set for examination purposes. You may dismiss this last remark as trivial and hardly worth your serious consideration, but it does have serious implications. If plays

were written for performance, then it follows that those who have to be involved in performing them – actors, directors, designers – need to study them with as much perception, care and imagination as students. Such people must ask the same crucial question as students of every playtext they encounter: ‘How are the playwright’s intentions realised in performance?’

Students can learn much from the way in which actors and directors approach the study of a play and you will benefit from tackling a play *as if* the end product were a production rather than an essay. Some of the suggestions in this book might provide insights into ways of doing this. The idea of ‘study’ is usually associated with reading, solitary contemplation and quiet reflection, all of which is valuable. But in the case of drama there are other dimensions. ‘Study’ may involve theatre visits, play-reading and other practical ways of exploring a text. There is not a division between activity and thinking: on the contrary, there is clearly established link between thought and action, so do not be surprised if you only come to understand a line when you have to speak it for yourself or if you only realise the impact of an entrance of a character into a room when you have experienced it in performance.

Do not be alarmed by the idea of performance. The aim of this book is not to make an actor or actress of you and there *will* be a strong emphasis on traditional, bookish study. However, the *possibility* of performance must always be in your mind and there are various practical activities that are helpful without demanding a high level of acting-skill. There is, though, no substitute for quietly reading the play – so this is where we shall begin.

First reading

LET us suppose that you are required to study Arthur Miller's play ***Death of a Salesman***, written in 1948. You may know nothing about the playwright except, perhaps, that he was once married to Marilyn Monroe and that in terms of dates he fits the label 'modern dramatist'. Initially you should aim to read through the entire play as quickly and comfortably as possible. No modern play is likely to take more than a few hours to read and you should get used to the idea of reading it several times at varying levels. Your *first* reading is almost certainly going to be more like reading a novel; you will probably picture the events taking place in real life rather than on a stage, and your response will be emotional, focused on the characters and their situations, rather than the critical, analytic response which we are finally hoping to achieve. Inevitably at this stage you will find yourself skimming over the lengthy stage directions and giving most attention to what the characters say. In *Death of a Salesman*, however, you will discover that you cannot afford to disregard the stage directions entirely or you will become utterly confused, especially by the sections which use a 'flashback' technique; but for the time being some of the precise instructions embedded in the stage directions can be set aside. The fact that I need to mention this at all does, though, highlight another characteristic of modern drama: this is that the material contained in a playtext is a great deal more than dialogue, especially when compared with a Shakespeare play.

As a result of your first, rapid reading you should be able to identify a number of *important features* upon which you will be able to build your critical response. If you do not bear these in mind, your reading will be aimless and probably of little value; more important, these features will help you to make sense of your first contact with the play.

Action

The first general aspect of the play that you should be able to discuss after an initial reading is what actually *happens*. Be careful here, though. Students often place far too much emphasis on this element and so offer a summary of the story-line or plot as a substitute for a critical commentary. One reason for this is that they fail to distinguish between the play's *story*, its *action* and its *performance*. A play tells the story and the outline of that story must be clear in your mind by the time you finish reading the play. So, for example, we can say that Miller's *Death of a Salesman* tells the story of a salesman, Willy Loman, and how his life slowly disintegrates into failure until he kills himself.

This story, however, is not told in a straightforward chronological sequence; instead, events from the past are interspersed among scenes from the present. Strictly speaking, the story begins in the scenes set furthest in the past, but the action of the play begins in the present. What the *action* of the play does is to show and explain the death of Willy Loman by a deliberate juxtaposing of scenes and effects. As you read a play, you should be aware of this distinction between story and action: think of the action of the play as *the way* in which the story is presented and organised so as to bring out its meaning. *Death of a Salesman*, for example, clearly tells the story of Willy Loman's life and death; the action of the play, however, shows us how Willy is a victim of the American Dream of modern society and its values.

One complication that you need to be aware of is that the action of a play really embraces *all* that occurs during a *performance* of a play. A performance of a play is obviously impossible to reproduce just by reading it, but what you can seize upon to help you grasp the full action of the play is the *activity* in a theatrical performance. The actors playing the characters in *Death of a Salesman* are given dozens of activities by the playwright. They drink, get out of bed, move in specified ways, smoke, laugh, and so on. Modern plays are dense with such instructions and clearly you cannot hope to retain all these details even after several readings. This does not make them unimportant; on the contrary, playwrights since Ibsen have found it essential to provide minute details of the activities of

the characters in their plays so as to convey a full sense of them as human beings caught in a particular world, and we can never hope to grasp the meaning of a play without considering these issues. However, this is a matter for detailed scene study rather than general reading, and it is quite sufficient if, on your first contact with the play, you use these activities to lend your reading imaginative life. If you can also remember one or two details of such activities – for example, in *Death of a Salesman* we constantly see characters going to the refrigerator, or sitting down at the family table alone – that would be a bonus, for it will help you discipline your thinking by having something concrete to build on.

The protagonist's predicament

So far in our initial reading of the play we have been concerned not with *how* the dramatist conveys ideas or impressions, but simply with the material itself. The same applies at this stage to our next consideration – the protagonist's (central character's) predicament. Plays inevitably show characters in struggle against some problem or series of problems which threaten to overwhelm them. In modern drama the *protagonist* or *hero* possess so few of the heroic qualities we traditionally associate with that title that he is often known as an *anti-hero*, while the problems with which he is confronted are often domestic rather than of the grandiose, cosmic scale of Shakespeare. At a personal level, however, the outcome may be equally tragic, disturbing or harrowing.

By the conclusion of your first reading and consideration of the play you should be able to summarise both the action of the play and the central predicament in which the protagonist finds himself. The effect on you as a reader will be cumulative, because as you progress through the play further complications of the predicament will emerge. It is a good idea to note them down as you go.

Willy Loman's main predicament in *Death of a Salesman* is that he is in a situation to which he is entirely unfitted: he must live and support his family by being a salesman, yet his personality militates against success; he lives in an enclosed space, yet his nature longs for wide open spaces. He has added

to his predicament by a number of fatal errors of judgement: his brief unfaithfulness to his wife has permanently poisoned his relationship with his favourite son; the attitudes he has encouraged in Biff have contributed to the latter's failure at school in 'math'. In order to cope with the increasing pressures, Willy has manufactured a network of lies in which he has become trapped. So Willy is trapped in three ways: by his job, by his house and by his own deceit – inevitably there is only one ultimate means of escape.

Arthur Miller has chosen a particularly effective means by which to establish Willy Loman's predicament in theatrical terms, and the résumé I have offered only suggests the level of awareness you might reasonably be expected to reach after a single, rapid reading of the play. The issue is by no means exhausted, but if you pay attention to both the action of the play and also to the predicament of the main character, you should be able to say in general terms what the play you are studying is about.

Tensions and threats

Much of the fascination of plays stems from the interaction between the different characters. This aspect of a play only emerges fully in performance, but even at the early reading stage it is possible and essential to identify the sources of tension. The protagonist's predicament often engulfs and is frequently derived from other characters, yet we must not neglect to notice the tensions between lesser characters as well. *Identifying the lines of tension* between characters is another function of a first reading and again it is something you should note down as you read.

Interest in the way that people relate to each other is a particular feature of modern drama. It is partly a result of the developing science of psychology, which was in its infancy when Ibsen wrote his first naturalistic play. Modern playwrights are operating in a world which generally attempts to explain people's behaviour in rational, scientific terms and which sees individuals as needing to succeed in personal relationships in order to achieve a sense of well-being and social adjustment. Social order and personal happiness are

threatened by tensions between individuals or groups; tensions force us into playing different roles, adapting our behaviour to suit a situation; tensions may become obsessive fears.

If there were no tensions in a play or in life there would be perfect harmony but little interest. In drama, as in life, we look for a resolution of tensions and that is what makes characters in plays struggle on. The tramps in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), for example, endure a restless state of waiting because there is the hope that when Godot comes there will be some kind of resolution. Davies, the old tramp in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960), struggles to find a way of resolving the tension that has developed between himself and his new landlord Aston.

The major sources of tension in a play should therefore be one of your first concerns. The first few pages of *Death of a Salesman* show how relatively easy the tensions are to spot. As Willy replies to Linda's first questions about his day, there is already a hint of irritation and reluctance to give a straight answer. When Willy does explain his utter exhaustion, there is an element of refusal to face the facts in Linda's reply. Soon we hear of tension between Willy and his employers, a frightening tension between Willy and his son Biff, and also of conflicting perceptions of each other by father and son. Characters and situations also pose *threats* to other characters. We feel that Willy Loman sees Charley, his neighbour, as a threat to his self-esteem; Bernard, one of Biff's contemporaries and rivals, threatens to expose the false values Willy has instilled into his son; and, above all, the *past* threatens every aspect of Willy's present life. The past means that Willy must always delude himself and others, and this creates constant tension.

In your critical response to a play you are going to have to evaluate the dramatist's methods of showing the tensions and threats which govern the behaviour of the characters he has created. During and *just after* your first reading you will be concentrating on what characters say and do in the context of their developing situations, and you should ensure that you have a clear idea of the main features of the relationships between characters. You may need to go back over the play very quickly to check details and impressions and you *may* find it helpful to draw a diagram consisting of circles for each character and arrows joining them indicating possible causes of