



# MODERN DRAMA

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**PATTERNS IN MODERN DRAMA**

# PATTERNS IN

IBSEN

CHEKHOV

GALSWORTHY

O'NEILL

KELLY

THURBER

NUGENT

HELLMAN

*New*

PUBLISHED BY

## PREFACE

OF THIS COLLECTION of plays the primary purpose is to provide for college students on the freshman and sophomore levels the texts of seven plays that are well established in the repertory of the contemporary theater, that are representative of the main currents in drama from Ibsen to the present day, and that will furnish incentive to discussion of the patterns and ideas giving chief vitality to the twentieth-century theater.

The teeming activity of the European and American theater in the first half of this century has produced plays of bewildering variety. For this reason, any collection attempting to make a historical treatment of modern drama could hardly confine itself to as few plays as this volume contains. Moreover, the principle of selection would have to be markedly different. In the following collection the development of modern drama as a whole and the complicated web of interrelation between Continental and American drama can merely be suggested. The strictly "experimental" aspects of the modern theater have had to be excluded almost entirely. Nevertheless, the plays presented here should lay the foundation for further study of modern drama by providing for the student who is not already widely acquainted with literature of the stage an opportunity to study some of the basic dramatic forms that can be most profitably treated and most easily understood.

On the assumption that the student who has seen and read relatively few plays will be attracted first by the feelings and ideas expressed in the drama rather than by anything so abstract as form, an effort has been made to select as many plays as possible that will stimulate discussion. Ibsen's ideas of political liberalism, Miss Hellman's presentation of an aspect of capitalism, the opinion of Messrs. Thurber and Nugent concerning the intelligence quotient of the college-bred American, Galsworthy's treatment of the difficulties of humanitarianism—all suggest lively issues. On the other hand, problems in charac-

## PREFACE

terization and in the conflicts of wills and emotions are amply provided for in the plays of Chekhov, O'Neill, and Kelly. The variety of the selection should enable the student to perceive the proper balance between the drama of ideas and the drama in which human emotions and feelings furnish the predominating element.

Out of an appreciation of drama for itself should develop an appreciation of form. The evolution of a good amateur critic will come chiefly through the intelligent guidance of the teacher, who will develop the necessary criteria for judging between the good and the poor play. A brief introduction has been included as a college primer of criticism. At best, it can be little more than an outline, providing only the most elementary tools for discussing plays. Its main purpose is to provide the student with a few simple definitions and a small critical vocabulary. The dangers of using labels should not be minimized; and the student should be constantly warned to avoid critical cant which is usually a substitute for any thinking at all. He should, therefore, be encouraged to go beyond the introduction for further reading and discussions that will give him a more trustworthy grasp of the major criteria of judgment.

Each play has been provided with a chronology of the author and with an introduction in which an effort has been made to discuss the significance of the play and its author in modern drama. Brief critical bibliographies are appended as guides to further reading.

Acknowledgment is hereby made to the Walter H. Baker Company for permission to use a translation of *An Enemy of the People*; to Charles Scribner's Sons for permission to use a translation of *Uncle Vanya* and the text of *The Pigeon*; to Random House for permission to reprint *The Emperor Jones*, *The Little Foxes*, and *The Male Animal*; and to Little, Brown and Company for permission to reprint *Craig's Wife*.

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## I. WHAT IS DRAMA?

THE ETYMOLOGY of the word *drama*, which is derived from the Greek verb *dran* meaning *to do* or *to act*, is important in determining its meaning. Basically, drama involves the presentation of a situation or the telling of a story in terms of some kind of physical *action*, whether it be that of savages dancing around a totem pole, that of strolling players presenting their "interludes" in innyards of sixteenth-century England, or that of a sophisticated group of actors performing a comedy by Noel Coward in a theater just off Broadway. Usually this action is visible physical action on a stage, although radio drama in our own time has been able to accomplish its purpose entirely through sound, and moving pictures have substituted for the limitations of the stage the unlimited potentialities of the screen. Since the basic means of presenting life on the stage is through the spoken words of the actors as well as through pantomime and other forms of physical movement, perhaps we should say that *a drama tells a story by means of dialogue and action*.

It will hardly be appropriate to discuss here at length the easily recognizable and the universal phenomenon called *dramatic instinct*—that desire of human beings, primitive and civilized, to represent action or to impersonate. Its most elementary manifestations are apparent in tribal ceremonials of primitive peoples and in the games and "make-believe" of children. No one, it is true, will want to call a totem-pole dance or a game of cops and robbers drama in the sense in which we usually employ the term; but even these simple forms illustrate the fundamental conception of drama as an *objective representation of action* in which actors assume characters other than their own and engage in "make-believe."

If we seek a definition of drama from professional playwrights and critics, we shall find conflicting opinions. For example, the French critic Brunetière, writing in the eighteen nineties, saw drama as essen-

tially "the will of man in conflict with the mysterious powers or natural forces which limit and belittle us." Other critics have felt that Brunetière's emphasis on conflict and struggle is too limited. At one point in his career, Maeterlinck urged the neglect of the external phenomena of life for the attempt to present spiritual and emotional undercurrents or "soul states." In this sort of approach drama may be meaningful action entirely without conflict. William Archer found his most satisfactory approach to drama through crisis (embodying the idea of turn or reversal) rather than through conflict, which he regards as only one of the most important elements, rather than as the sole distinguishing element, of drama. By Archer's definition a play is a "more or less rapidly developing crisis in destiny or circumstances, and a dramatic scene is a crisis within a crisis, clearly furthering the ultimate event."

Since Maeterlinck's approach chiefly involves a type of plotless or "static" play that he himself developed and later abandoned, the need for reconciliation lies chiefly between the theories of Brunetière and those of Archer. A possible compromise is found in the position that whereas obvious or heroic conflict and struggle are not essential, drama does involve some sort of opposition of two forces, external or internal, conscious or subliminal, tangible or intangible—an opposition often emphasized and made effective by crisis. Many plays will have a definite development or motion in one direction and a turn or reversal of this motion that gives significance to the whole. However, even though the action of a play may be slight and though it may end inconclusively, this action will usually develop to the point at which two lines of thought, of physical force, or of feeling either meet or stand out against one another in significant contrast. The fact that a play ends inconclusively obviously does not mean that forces within it have not been revealed in opposition. Actually, inconclusion may be conclusion enough.

To examine specific plays, *AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE* and *THE PIGEON* embody very obvious opposition and even clashes of ideas and ideals. But whereas in the first the clash of forces has a definite outcome, in the second the outcome is inconclusive. Again, the conflict of personalities and wills in *THE LITTLE FOXES* is a salient feature of the play. This conflict is no less strong for being less obvious in *UNCLE VANYA*, the deliberate movement of which is in sharp contrast to the vigorous movement of *THE LITTLE FOXES*. In *THE EMPEROR JONES* the opposition exists on two levels: the external, in which the hero

struggles with a group for his life; and the internal, in which he struggles with a force within himself.

An analysis of only a few plays will suggest that the opposition or conflict of forces in the drama may fall into many patterns. The two forces may be represented by two human beings, one human being and a particular social group, two groups of human beings, one human being and society at large, a human being and Fate or God, a human being and the forces within himself, or a human being and the forces of nature or environment. It is possible that more than one conflict or opposition may be involved in a play, but usually there is only one of real significance.

Though we shall be concerned with conflict in the main lines of dramatic action in the play, our interest in contrast both as a distinguishing quality of drama and as a structural device will be even more pervading. The thoughtful student will want to perceive how the dramatist contrasts character with character, mood with mood, tempo with tempo in achieving his total pattern.

## II. TYPES OF PLAYS

OF EVERY play we may ask three basic questions: Does it give chief emphasis to fullness and intensity of characterization or does it depend upon action for its appeal? Is its intent serious or is it humorous? Does it end unhappily or does it end happily? If we could assume that all plays adhered to type, we might divide them all, according to emphasis, intent, and conclusion, into two general categories: tragedy and comedy. In actual practice, however, plays do not always fall neatly even into general categories. The blending of comedy and tragedy, the possibilities of countless nuances between the two, and the various ways of handling characters and action have all tended to create such an infinite variety of forms that classification may seem ridiculous. Nevertheless, the fundamental concepts of tragedy and comedy remain as valuable guides.

Tragedy is the most serious type of drama. Though no definition of the term is entirely safe, in general it connotes that type of play which deals with the somber and serious aspects of life, places its emphasis on characterization, and ends unhappily—often in the death of

the leading character. If we conceive of drama in terms of the opposition of two forces, which we shall call positive and negative, we may think of tragedy as ending with the defeat of the positive force. (The character representing the positive force is often referred to as the *protagonist*, and the opposing force or obstacle is designated as the *antagonist*.) So conceived, tragedy may have death as a typical but not as an absolutely necessary ingredient. The defeat of the hero, it may easily be seen, may be more poignant if he continues to live than if he dies at the end of the play.

Since tragedy concentrates, not merely on characterization, but most often on a single character, there may be certain qualifications that we shall expect the tragic character to possess. He cannot be a weakling or a creature of complete depravity. Even a man of impeccable goodness is not usually an acceptable tragic hero. The tragic character is more often a human being with sufficient strength and worth to command our sympathy and respect but with some "flaw" or weakness capable of setting in motion a chain of events that, through the operations of the laws of cause and effect, will eventually bring about his destruction. The weak or helpless character who is subjected to misfortune is pathetic rather than tragic.

The Greek playwrights, who wrote with a definite religious sense, conceived of the tragic hero as violating the will of the gods in some way that would ultimately bring about his pursuit and death by an avenging Nemesis. So, in the main, Greek tragedy presents the struggle of man with Fate or Destiny. The Elizabethans, with the Renaissance emphasis on man as a free agent, were less concerned with man's struggle with God or the gods. Rather did their tragedies pit man against man, and man against the forces inside himself. Modern drama, with its heightened consciousness of man not as an individual but as a part of society, has often placed emphasis on the struggle between man and forces in his environment and heredity. The conception of tragedy has also changed; it now comprehends not the fall of a great man but the defeat of the common man.

But whatever form the objective struggle takes, the important consideration is always what goes on *inside* the tragic character. It is essentially a contest in which he stands alone against the universe and in which his destiny—as well as the destiny of mankind, which he symbolizes—is involved. With this idea in mind, one may make a broad philosophical distinction between comedy and tragedy that will

go beyond such a technical consideration as a happy or an unhappy ending. Comedy in its purest form becomes an intellectual instrument shaping a criticism of life: its manners, its customs, its institutions, its attitudes. Tragedy apprehends emotionally and is far deeper and broader in scope, for it is concerned, not with the surface manifestations of life, but with the moral order of the universe and the destiny of man.

Great tragedy has the effect of arousing in the spectator the emotions of fear and pity and of inducing in him a sense of awe, giving him as it does so a vision of moral order and law and an insight into human striving and suffering. As Aristotle puts it, tragedy not only arouses the emotions of fear and pity, but it offers an opportunity for a *catharsis* or a purging of these emotions. For these reasons, tragedy is a very lofty form of art and is difficult to achieve.

On a somewhat lower plane is *melodrama*, which is related to tragedy in the type of material used. Melodrama, however, differs from tragedy in the treatment of that material; and it does not of necessity end unhappily. Often the words *melodrama* and *melodramatic* are used to indicate dramatic action that is tawdrily affected or strained in the direction of violence or sentimentality. Such a concept of the terms does an injustice to many plays to which they should rightly be applied. More broadly, melodrama is that type of serious play in which the action tends to become of greater importance than the characterization and in which the excitement produced by the plot tends to take precedence over the seriousness of the theme. In a melodrama either the problem may be of insufficient weight to give the action significance beyond its purely theatrical interest, or the action and characters may be of insufficient worth to lend significance to the problem. Reducing the matter to the simplest terms, one may say that melodrama differs most significantly from tragedy in its emphasis upon action rather than upon characterization and theme.

Returning to our idea of opposing forces in a play, we may conceive of a comedy as a play in which the protagonist or the positive force triumphs. Naturally, a comedy does not have to be light and humorous throughout. It may involve serious action and the complications may even be potentially grim. Unlike a tragedy, which usually concentrates on one character, a comedy may develop several characters of equal importance.

The Greeks kept comedy and tragedy distinct. The Elizabethans,

on the other hand, assumed great freedom in mixing them. The greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies, for example, may introduce comic scenes as a means of achieving momentary relief from dramatic tension; and such a comedy as Shakespeare's *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* is so full of serious possibilities that up to its very conclusion the action might have been tragic. The modern play, in its attempt to reveal the complete panorama of life, may present such a mixture of the humorous and the serious that neither *comedy* nor *tragedy* will seem an apt term to apply to it. Moreover, as we have seen, it may be inconclusive in its action and, consequently, may present far greater problems of classification than the Elizabethan play, in which almost every character is either married or buried in the last act.

It is easy to see how in some plays in which the conclusion is neither strictly comic nor tragic, the serious elements may greatly overbalance the humorous ones. In such instances, some critics have chosen a term like *problem play* as a compromise. The term *comedy of ideas* is also used for a play involving the discussion of serious ideas.

Comedy into which no very serious element intrudes may achieve a high quality. It is particularly entertaining when it takes the form of the *comedy of manners*, the type of play in which the *mores* of society provide the elements of humor. It may also be very amusing in the *folk comedy*, which has been very popular in recent years, and in which folkways perform the same function that etiquette and social convention do in the comedy of manners. When a comedy is not concerned primarily with characterization, and when it gets its effect chiefly by presenting a series of amusing situations or speeches, it is called *farce*. Like a good melodrama, a good *farce* may be an extremely skillful piece of writing. If its situations degenerate into rough and tumble with little wit or logic, it may become *low comedy* or *slapstick*. On the other hand, it may be colored by satire and may become an instrument of brilliant wit. But the highest and most civilized type of comedy is that in which a significant problem—moral, social, or otherwise—is embodied in characters whose development provides the central interest.

Application of these basic categories to the dramas included in this book should provoke interesting discussion. One may immediately observe that contemporary plays on serious themes are by no means so much concerned with the moral responsibility of the hero for his destruction as Greek and Elizabethan tragedies are. As a result, the hero often becomes of more importance as a symbol in the total mean-

ing of the play than as an individual struggling against great universal forces, and a question may arise as to whether a truly tragic effect is attained. *AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE*, for example, plainly has a tragic outcome. But one may well ask whether the medical reformer defeated by the selfish public is not more important as the embodiment of a limited social idea than he is as an individual representing mankind. A similar question may be asked in regard to *UNCLE VANYA*, in which the tragedy of the character who gives his name to the play is only an aspect of the total tragic effect of the play. One may also ask whether *THE EMPEROR JONES* is not rather a penetrating and exciting psychological study of a limited aspect of human experience than a profound comment on universal human aspiration and struggle. These and many other questions may be involved in reaching conclusions about the conception of tragedy in the drama of our own day. The line of demarcation between the pathetic and the tragic is not always a clear one, and revisions in definitions may be necessary. Such considerations will lead the serious student to a more intensive study of the meaning of tragedy.

Though *THE LITTLE FOXES* ends with the triumph of the central character, it is hardly a comedy. The character of Regina is of such depravity that, even though she had been defeated in her struggle, she could not have been regarded as a tragic heroine. No one can fail to see that the gripping action and brilliant interplay of wits and characters are the genius of the play. The most satisfactory classification for *THE LITTLE FOXES* is that of melodrama, debatable though the classification may be.

In calling *THE PIGEON* a "fantasy," Galsworthy warns us that he is going to be as whimsical as he pleases. At the same time, his play is not a mere *jeu d'esprit* for an evening's entertainment in the theater. Its ideas are serious. Though it ends inconclusively, the ending is certainly not unhappy. One will have no difficulty in classifying it as a comedy, and—since it is full of discussion of its central theme—a comedy of ideas.

Though *THE MALE ANIMAL* is shot through with satire, and though it makes pertinent comments on modern living, its gaiety and boisterousness is in marked contrast to the relatively quiet and deliberate development of *THE PIGEON*. *THE MALE ANIMAL* may, therefore, be safely classified as a farce.

If we were forced to choose between the labels comedy and tragedy for *CRAIG'S WIFE*, we should be confronted with a real difficulty.

The play is throughout a serious character study, and its outcome is not exactly happy. Unlike *THE LITTLE FOXES*, it is not characterized by melodramatic violence and briskness of action. It is hardly tragic, for when in the end we find the heroine alone in the possession of the material things for which she has sacrificed all human values, we can have little sympathy for her. The somberness of this outcome makes the play fit ill among comedies. We may, therefore, compromise by calling it a problem play.

### III. THE DRAMATIST'S APPROACH

**A**FTER we have examined a play to determine whether its intent is humorous or serious, whether its conclusion is happy or unhappy, and whether it emphasizes action or characterization, we must consider still another very significant aspect of the dramatist's use of his material. Though the presentation of life through action is the aim of the dramatist, methods of achieving the dramatic effect may vary widely.

The Greeks regarded drama as an "imitation" of life. A contemporary playwright, however, has pointed out that the duty of the dramatist is not so much to bring life to the stage as it is to bring the stage to life. The two points of view are not incompatible.

What every dramatist is required to do is to create the *illusion of reality*. By no means is he chained inexorably to reality itself. In fact, he may present life on the stage, not as it actually is, but as it might be or should be. Instead of presenting life so that the appeal of the presentation is from its reasonableness, the playwright may make a highly imaginative projection. The play may deal with far-away places, unusual characters, and extraordinary action. Its world may be the world of imagination or the world of dreams. It may take us to the remote past or to the distant future.

In general, the approach which departs from everyday experience to present the exotic, the idyllic, the remote, or the unusual is said to be *romantic*, and the obligation of the dramatist is not so much to convince the audience of the actual truth of his presentation as it is to win from the audience a "willing suspension of disbelief." *Realistic* drama, on the other hand, attempts to present types of people and action that are familiar to us. Though the best realistic plays emphasize

characterization rather than action, the realistic approach does not rule out complicated plotting. At the same time, its characters and situations are more nearly acceptable to the reason than are the characters and situations of the romantic play. It may be concluded, then, that whereas the realistic dramatist is more definitely obligated than the romantic dramatist to make a presentation of life as it is actually lived, the former operates with extensive freedom regarding the way in which he selects, arranges, interprets, and criticizes the details of life that he presents.

*Naturalistic* drama, which has attained wide popularity in our century, attempts to intensify realism and to make what is presented on the stage more scientific and more nearly acceptable to man's reasoning powers. Unlike the realist, who may color his material with his own feelings, the naturalistic dramatist must emancipate himself from his emotions. Sympathy for characters or classes of society must not betray him into pleading their case. He must be coldly objective. He does not condemn, judge, or praise; he observes and describes, giving as nearly photographic a rendering of reality as possible. To tell the *truth* about his characters is his sole object, not to decide what they ought to do or what ought to be done to them. He acknowledges one law, that of cause and effect, and his aim is to show human life to be the product of material causes acting according to natural law. Under such a theory, the naturalistic dramatist must abandon some of the best established dramatic devices. Complicated plotting can hardly exist in naturalistic drama, for such action is not often enough a real part of life. In all respects, the playwright tries to make the pattern of the play appear to lie in life itself rather than in the playwright's mind.

A play like Maeterlinck's *PELLÉAS AND MÉLISANDE* may be selected as a classic example of the romantic approach. In it the playwright, Maeterlinck, makes little concession to life as it is lived in his own day. The time-setting is in the indefinite past, the very distant past; and the place-setting is in a misty kingdom of medieval romance. The characterization and the action belong to poetry rather than to life. Ibsen, on the other hand, is writing about people and problems of his own day in *AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE*. He embarks on the dramatic presentation of an idea, selecting his characters from contemporary life and arranging his details so that his purpose will be fulfilled. Chekhov also deals with his own contemporaries in *UNCLE VANYA*, but he is less