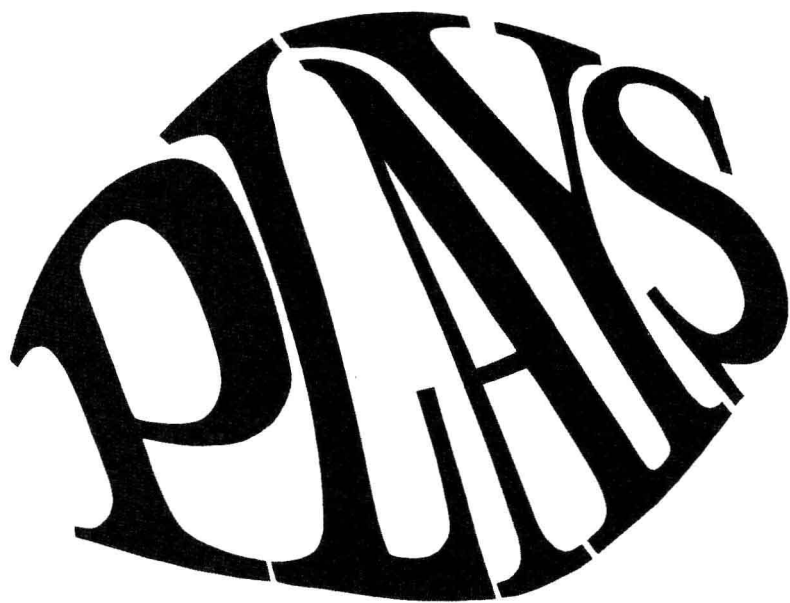


TEACHING  
*LITERATURE*  
TO  
ADOLESCENTS

PLAYS

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SCOTT, FORESMAN AND COMPANY

# Preface

When Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote more than a hundred years ago that the drama had “outgrown such toys . . . [as] simulated stature, face, and speech” and might soon outgrow “the simulation of the painted scene . . . and take for a worthier stage the soul itself,” (*Aurora Leigh*, Bk. V) she was perhaps neither an accurate dramatic historian nor an accurate prophet; yet she saw clearly the dichotomy inherent in all drama. And that dichotomy has profound implications for the teaching of drama to adolescents.

How far should the teacher try to re-create the conditions of the theatre—the stage business, the excitement, the immediacy of theatrical performance—how far should he try to make his students see the drama as taking place on the stage of “the soul itself”? *Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Plays* attempts some tentative answers to these questions, both for the prospective teacher and the teacher with some years of experience who feels the need for fresh perspectives. Accordingly, I have discussed a number of plays commonly taught, focusing my attention on such topics as these: (1) ways in which the experience of adolescents with TV can be used to increase their appreciation of other drama; (2) means for removing some of the barriers to understanding plays; (3) interests of adolescents—especially in character—and ways to capitalize on these interests; (4) approaches to dramatic form, not as an abstract pattern but rather as a means by which the playwright generates responses in his audience; and (5) the special difficulties of stereotype and oversimplification that must be overcome if adolescents are to gain true sympathy and understanding for the tragic hero. The book also suggests some classroom approaches to specific dramatic concepts and reprints three fresh examples of drama which are not readily available in standard texts—one from radio, one from TV, and one from the very different dramatic tradition of Japan.

I am especially grateful to the distinguished dramatists who consented to the interviews printed here. The names of Arthur Miller and Rod Serling symbolize the best of contemporary achievement in different dramatic forms. Both men care about the quality of drama and both care about the way drama is received by its audience, whether in the theatre, the classroom, or the circle of the television set.

My other debts are numerous: to my students and my colleagues for the opportunity to explore the questions of dramatic form and meaning during classes, coffee breaks, and conferences; to my wife, Lidie, for her patience in discussing the book during all the stages of its development. I am also especially indebted to Miss Jean Reynolds, Language Arts Coordinator for the Ann Arbor Public Schools, for her constructive suggestions about the entire manuscript and to the editorial staff at Scott, Foresman, including Curtis Johnson and Mrs. Carol Embury, for their editorial counsel. Finally, Stephen Dunning, my colleague and collaborator in this series of books on teaching literature to adolescents, has acted the roles of gadfly and friend with equal vigor—for which I am grateful.

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## PART ONE

# Teaching Plays

### *A Visit to Some Hypothetical Classrooms*

The fact that many plays are written in poetic form is no accident. Quite apart from the things they share in origin and history, poetry and drama share many characteristics as literary forms. Both use language richly, often with enormous concentration and power. Both are meant to be heard. Both demand a more immediate response and a more direct involvement than other forms of literature. Both provide an experience that can be rich and exciting—but is too often boring or meaningless for adolescents, for both are difficult forms to teach.

Some teachers simply do not enjoy poetry or drama. Some feel inadequate when it comes to teaching them, for these two literary forms are the hardest to get at in essence, though possibly the easiest to skim on the surface. Rather than help students get inside a poem a teacher may succumb to the temptation to teach what iambic tetrameter and trochaic dimeter are, and rather than help students experience a play in all its richness a teacher may simply put a neat outline of rising and falling action on the board. The temptations are numerous: the temptation to talk about poems as if they were merely a rather complicated and arbitrary way of making a simple prose statement; the temptation to treat a play as if it were a novel with everything but the dialogue left out; the temptation in both to substitute history, mechanics, or biography for genuine experience of the work itself.

This is not to say that a teacher should *never* teach historical background or stagecraft, for example, but rather that the primary

focus should be kept where it belongs: on the work itself. Whittling, gluing, and painting a model of Shakespeare's theatre is not a substitute for reading *Macbeth*—though a knowledge of the Elizabethan stage can, of course, contribute to an understanding of the play. It is important for students to have some basic, stock knowledge about poetry and drama, but this knowledge should be used to contribute to real understanding and appreciation. And understanding and appreciation come not from one source or technique but from many. Any single approach without the balance of alternative approaches may open up insights in one direction while closing them in others.

### Some single approaches

Let's sketch some hypothetical and exaggerated portraits of teachers with single approaches and watch what happens as they teach the drama unit. First we have Miss A, a drama-speech major with a minor in English. She appeared in many student productions during her four years in college and still has a tinge of regret she didn't pursue a career in the professional theatre, though she enjoys her English classes—especially when she comes to the drama unit. She looks on this unit as a chance to give her students some initiation into "the world of the theatre" and she also enjoys coaching the senior play each year and working with the drama club.

The students who are in the drama club respond enthusiastically to the plays they study in their regular English class, as do many of the other members of the class; but some of her students feel a certain disappointment with the drama unit. "You have to practically be an actor to get a good grade," says Sally Dillon. "It's boring to read every word of a play in class," says Doug Ames.

Miss A's approach to drama in her English classes follows quite logically from her personal interests and talents. When she teaches *Our Town* to her eleventh-graders or *Macbeth* to her twelfth-graders, she assumes the role of director and has her students present the entire play in class. She assigns parts for each day's "performance" and spends a good deal of time telling her students about the special intentions of Wilder for his stage or about the special conditions of the Elizabethan stage. During the readings in class, she points out the action and the gestures that should accompany the lines and tries to correct students whose reading is not dramatically effective. By the third or fourth day of reading some of the students, like Sally and Doug, begin to get a bit restless, either because they have participated only briefly by reading a line or two (since they are poor readers) or because they are tired of waiting for Miss A to get on to

the question of "what the play means." She never really has the class consider that question specifically, since she believes the most important thing is for students to "confront" a play through reading and acting it out in class.

Some of her students do respond enthusiastically to this "confrontation," though others wish they had Mr. X down the hall for English. Mr. X reads the entire play himself and gives footnotes and detailed interpretive comments on the various lines as he goes along. His students are in no doubt about his interpretation of the meaning of the play, and some of them are glad to "know where they stand" in his course. (His test at the end of the unit—easy to give and to grade—asks them merely to remember what he has said.) Some of Mr. X's students long for the opportunity that Miss A provides for members of her class to become actors; others resent the fact that they must accept Mr. X's interpretation of the play without question; and some—like Doug and Sally in Miss A's class—find it "boring" to go through a play line by line.

Mr. B at a neighboring school has an entirely different approach. Mr. B has an English minor with no training in dramatics, although one of his college courses gave him what he considers a useful formula for attacking any play. He wrote many reports for this course, analyzing individual plays by breaking down the action of each into four stages: *exposition*, *rising action*, *climax*, and *falling action*. Mr. B spends most of his class time during the drama unit establishing what the "action" or story of each play is and how it can be broken down into the four stages.

But Mr. B feels a little uneasy teaching drama and he rather admires his colleague Miss Y's approach. During their coffee breaks she has told him that she concentrates on a close study of the imagery in a play. He senses that her study of "blood" and "light and darkness" in *Macbeth* adds a dimension of meaning to the play, but he feels he doesn't have the background to do this in his own class. (Miss Y's very best students, incidentally, find her class exciting, but her average and below-average students would rather be in Mr. B's class.) Students often have quite heated discussions in Mr. B's classes about exactly where the climax of a play comes or where the exposition ends and the rising action begins, but some of them are unhappy that the class hours are "so cut and dried." They say that Mr. B's approach (with his single-minded insistence on structure) "spoils the play" for them.

While Mr. B insists on the importance of structure, his office mate, Mrs. C, disregards it. An enthusiastic English major, Mrs. C also found her courses in philosophy, psychology, and sociology



especially interesting. She always enjoys the drama unit, since she thinks that plays give her an even better opportunity than other forms of literature to bring questions of "human value and behavior" to the attention of her classes. She tries to devote most of her class time to discussions of what kind of people the characters are, why they did what they did, and how the world in which they live resembles her students' own world. Her students develop strong feelings toward the characters and enjoy discussing the "issues" of the plays. They say Mrs. C makes it seem as if in a play you were watching something happen to someone down the street or reading about people in the newspaper. But some of her students brag that they don't have to read the assignment to "lead her off into a bull session," and others complain that the class doesn't "stick to the point" enough.

#### **Reaching more students**

It should be obvious that each of these five teachers has something to give his students, though no one of them reaches all his students. Of course no teacher can expect to reach all his students all the time, but the teacher with more than one string to his teaching bow reaches a relatively larger percentage of his class and does it more of the time than the teacher with a single approach. This is not to say that the drama unit should turn into a smörgåsbord or a politician's dream of something for everybody, but rather that most students profit from being exposed to more than one approach, and some students not reached by one approach may be reached by another. Let's assess the strengths and weaknesses of these five teachers' drama units, taking into account some of the characteristics of adolescents that help to determine the effectiveness of any drama unit.

Miss A, the drama-speech major, attempts to make drama an experience for her students roughly comparable to that which they might have in a theatre if they went to try out for a part. She tries to involve them by assigning parts to be read and stressing acting techniques, staging, and background of the theatre itself. Most of her students have some interest in these matters, but since she scants the question of "meaning" and pays little attention to form, some of her students feel unsatisfied at the close of the unit. They tend to lose perspective on the play as a whole, and even those who enjoy being "actors" and do most of the reading would like to have more discussion on what the play means. Since adolescents like to project themselves into the situations of people they find interesting, Miss A's best readers acquire valuable acting experience, but those who

do not read well are left behind, and the attention span of almost all her students is strained by the line-by-line reading of the entire play.

Mr. X down the hall leaves his class with a firm sense of what *he* thinks the play means, but his students also tend to be restless under the line-by-line approach, especially since they don't have much chance to participate in class discussion. His "reading" and commentary is lively and talented, but it doesn't sustain interest after the second or third day, and many of his students feel that his interpretation is sometimes rather arbitrary. (Even though they know their ideas may not be as sound as his, they would like to have a chance to discuss them.)

Mr. B at the neighboring school allows his class ample opportunity for discussion about the four stages in the action of a play, but he does not discuss the things that might be of most interest and value to his students. Though they occasionally become quite excited about the question of exactly where the climax of the play comes, this question does not automatically ensure true understanding or enjoyment. Mr. B tends to treat questions of structure too mechanically, merely looking for confirmation of his own analysis. He does not manage, for example, to make students see the relationship of the climax to the action as a whole, nor does he help them come to a real understanding of what a turning point in a play means: a point from which there is no possibility of retreat for a character. And he fails to generate much excitement about the formal matters that interest him because he does not recognize his students' reluctance to consider matters of pure form apart from questions involving meaning and characters.

Mr. B's colleague Miss Y, in her concentration on patterns of imagery, tries to use the format of some of her own advanced courses at a level where it is inappropriate. Though her best students are sometimes intrigued by this approach, she leaves the rest far behind since she does not lead up to her study of imagery with sufficient background and consideration of more obvious matters. While her students could be led to an understanding of the way in which the imagery of a play reinforces characterization, action, mood, etc., she unfortunately presents patterns of imagery for their own sake and fails to relate them to other elements. Adolescents need to be led gradually from simple to more complex matters before they can appreciate the subtleties of an author's language or style, or the complexity of his structure.

Mr. B's office mate, Mrs. C, in her emphasis on character and idea, taps probably the most important sources of adolescent interest. Philosophical, psychological, and sociological questions are of

interest to adolescents; indeed, perhaps their major interest in a work of literature usually lies in the kind of character depicted and how he meets the challenge of his environment and situation. But at the same time there is the danger that consideration of these matters can lead away from rather than into the work itself. Mrs. C's classes often verge on becoming uncontrolled bull sessions. (Talk about Hamlet's indecision somehow leads to talk about the students' indecision in choosing a college for next year.) Though these sessions are usually lively, they often do not lead to greater understanding and appreciation of the play itself. Mrs. C has hit on matters that interest and motivate her students to lively discussion, but she is shirking part of her responsibility for making them more discerning readers of the text itself.

### Summary

Each of these five teachers could benefit by some borrowing of techniques from the others. Each has managed to excite and engage some of the students in the class, but each has failed to reach as many students as he might, because his approach has been, to one degree or another, one-sided. Though adolescents are individuals—hence generalizations are dangerous—some generalizations do stem from the successes and failures of these five teachers:

1. *Class discussion is valuable.* Most students enjoy participating in discussion and even those who don't participate usually profit from this approach. But discussion is most valuable when it focuses clearly on matters that are related to the work itself. It should not be arbitrary nor should it concern matters that are too technical or too abstruse.

2. *Meaning is important and character is the best key to meaning.* Most students are interested in considering the nature and actions of the characters and their motivation. Though one can get at the meaning of a play through a study of structure, imagery, etc., these approaches are usually more difficult and less challenging for high school students than the study of the character.

3. *The staging and production of a play shed light upon its meaning.* Since most drama is written to be produced on a stage, it is important for students to understand this aspect of a play. But brief background of the conditions of the stage, plus in-class reading of key scenes, is more valuable than background that is too detailed or reading that

covers the whole play. Attention and interest spans usually militate against a line-by-line consideration.

4. *Form should be treated in its relationship to character and theme.* Students will not profit from dividing a play into parts unless they understand that the divisions reflect changes in the personalities and fortunes of the characters and that those changes, in turn, determine the theme. To prevent the discussion of form from becoming a sterile exercise or a guessing game, the teacher must help his students see the relationship of the parts of the play to each other and to the gradual unfolding of a theme from a dramatic situation.

5. *A multiplicity of approaches increases both understanding and interest.* Too many students come away from a drama unit without having been given more than one way to approach a play—without, in other words, sufficiently increasing their powers as readers and critics. The teacher who increases the breadth of his own perspectives and the flexibility of his own critical approach can help his students toward similar insights and greater enjoyment.



## PART TWO

# Stage, Screen, and Tube

Most of today's students have had extensive exposure outside the classroom to movies and television: only a handful of them have had much experience with stage drama.<sup>1</sup> There is, of course, the yearly school play and there may be the occasional theatre trip arranged by an English teacher; but movies, and especially TV, are with them week in and week out. Many teachers are inclined to deplore the influence of movies and TV upon adolescent taste: others assume that they can automatically count on experience in the two mediums to make the teaching of drama easier and more interesting. Thus one teacher may feel that his job is to replace Jim's unfortunate taste for *Gunsmoke* with a love for Shakespeare, while his colleague down the hall may be sure that because Karen never misses a *Peyton Place* episode, it will be an easy matter to get her to respond enthusiastically to *Our Town*. *Macbeth* can be made as exciting to a class as *Gunsmoke* and *Our Town* as absorbing as *Peyton Place*—and the taste of the student can be made more discerning in the process—but this happens only when the teacher knows something about the students' experiences with movies and TV and recognizes the essential differences between the forms—the special things that distinguish stage plays from other kinds of drama.

1. Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, has recently estimated that freshmen entering college in the fall of 1967 had completed an average of 10,800 hours in elementary and secondary classrooms, but had spent an average of 15,000 hours viewing television and had seen 500 motion pictures. (*JM Newsletter*, VI:2 [December 1967], 3. [Published by the National Council of Teachers of English.])

**Misconceptions about dramatic forms**

Three misconceptions about the various dramatic forms stand in the way of this knowledge. First, there is the misconception that stage plays by their very nature are superior in quality to other kinds of drama. Though movies may not, in the optimistic words of Hollywood, be "better than ever," there have been and will continue to be many films of high quality. "Can either the novel or the drama begin to rival the film in depth as well as in wealth of creative production these past twenty years?" asked film critic Roger Manvell in 1955.<sup>2</sup> And the question remains a valid one. Likewise, television, for all its stretches of inanity directed at the less-than-twelve-year-old mind, has produced stimulating and creative dramatic programs; and the best television plays (more appropriate for the classroom than the best movie scripts, for a reason to be discussed) are beginning to make their way into the high school curriculum. There are good and bad movies and good and bad TV programs, just as there are good and bad plays: the wise teacher will proceed to develop student taste after recognizing this fact rather than starting with the assumptions that all stage plays are sacrosanct and all movies and TV plays a waste of time.

The second misconception is that it is somehow sinful to regard drama as entertainment. On the contrary, all drama that is meant for production has entertainment as at least one of its purposes, whatever other purposes it may have. Even the propaganda play must be entertaining if it is to make its point successfully. And tragedy has its own special kind of entertainment: certainly Shakespeare's audiences were entertained. In the broadest sense, any play that catches our interest and makes us respond is entertainment, for entertainment doesn't necessarily imply amusement. The teacher should not present a play as if it were something to be studied and analyzed but not enjoyed and responded to. Such an approach will only cause students to sense a wider gap than exists between the plays they read in class and the dramatic entertainments they enjoy on TV or at the movie theatre. Especially in junior high, the teacher can best help his classes begin their enjoyment of literature if he emphasizes the similarities of the drama studied in class to other dramatic forms that students already enjoy. But at any level, though it may be much easier to analyze a play than to teach it as entertainment, the teacher should at least encourage students to respond rather than merely to dissect.

2. *The Film and the Public* (Baltimore: Pelican Books, 1955), p. 84.

The third misconception about dramatic forms is that stage play, movie, and television play are so similar in their forms that there are no significant differences for a teacher to take into account. Actually the three forms have important differences in their handling of time and space, in their use of language, and in the ways they evoke responses from an audience. These differences are further complicated by the fact that students actually *see* movies and TV programs outside the classroom, while their only contact with plays is *reading* them in English class. Even reading the plays aloud in class doesn't come very close to reproducing the conditions of a stage production.

#### Differences among dramatic forms

Perhaps the most important difference between stage play and movie or TV drama is in the handling of time and space. Stage plays are limited quite literally to the space of the stage itself, though in the Elizabethan theatre, as in many modern plays which use the stage with equal flexibility, this limitation is not much of a handicap. Shakespeare approximates the movie technique of alternating "cuts" of simultaneous action near the end of *Macbeth*, and Arthur Miller manages, in *Death of a Salesman*, to change the scene from Willy Loman's house to an office and a restaurant in New York and a hotel room in Boston without changing the scenery, just as he manages immediate jumps backward in time. The revolving stage also offers nearly unlimited possibilities for quick changes of scene. Movies, however, can achieve jumps in space and time much more easily than can stage drama. Thus we may go quite quickly, and without a strain on credibility or verisimilitude, from a panoramic scene of a battlefield to a close-up of a wounded soldier to a shot of that soldier lying in a hospital bed some days or weeks or months later, or at home, a civilian, some months or years before. Television has the same restrictions as the stage if it is a fully live production, the same freedom as the motion picture if the production is filmed or has filmed segments inserted into a live production. But in either a movie or a TV program, the eye of the camera becomes the eye of the spectator, and the viewer unconsciously accepts that perspective: in the stage play, the spoken line directs attention at the speaker and any other points of focus in the scene must usually be close to the speaker himself. Thus, changes in time and space are easier to follow in a movie or TV play, where they become obvious visually through the selectivity of the camera's eye, than they are in a play, where the speeches themselves are the primary means of focusing attention.

In a theatre like Shakespeare's the language must do the further job of supplementing the meagre scenery and giving the orientation



for change of scene. If the play is read rather than seen in a theatre, even the minimal visual reinforcement of gesture and movement is lacking and the language alone must do the job. Changes in time in movies and TV, though they seem rather artificial when presented through the flipping pages of a calendar or screen captions like "A Year Later," are also often reinforced visually by changes in the setting. Program notes or stage directions for a play may serve the same function; but, again, the reader of a play often will not catch the changes in setting, costuming, etc. that are given some visual reinforcement in the theatre.

The teacher must also realize that just as students find it difficult to follow changes of scene when they read a play, they find it difficult to imagine the facial expressions, the gestures, even the vocal modulations that an actor would employ on a stage. Students are used to the visual impact of the close-ups of movies and TV (even though wide-screen films are tending to make the close-up less subtle and less useful in movies), and they must be pushed to discover nuances in characterization from the language on the printed page. The image of the scowling villain or the perplexed hero with furrowed brow must come through words rather than facial expressions. The reactions of other characters to a given speech must be deduced from clues in the language. A student must read carefully, for example, to catch the clue to Macbeth's reaction to the witch's prophecy in Banquo's speech in Act I, scene iii:

My noble partner  
You greet with present grace and great prediction  
Of noble having and of royal hope,  
That he seems rapt withal.

(ll. 54-57)<sup>3</sup>

The movie or TV screen would give him no chance to miss the clue as the camera moved in for a close-up of the "rapt" Macbeth.

### Students' experience with drama

Students, then, come to us from their experience with movies and TV, prepared to respond to visual stimuli in the drama and also conditioned to a good deal of flexibility in the handling of time and space. Their experience with television, however, has begun to train

3. All line references for *Macbeth* are to *Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig, Twenty-One Play edition (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1958).