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DRAMA: AN INTRODUCTION

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Robert DiYanni is Professor of English at Pace University, Pleasantville, New York, where he teaches courses in literature, writing, and humanities. He has also taught at Queens College of the City University of New York, at New York University in the Graduate Rhetoric Program, and most recently in the Expository Writing Program at Harvard University. He received his B.A. from Rutgers University (1968) and his Ph.D. from the City University of New York (1976).

Professor DiYanni has written articles and reviews on various aspects of literature, composition, and pedagogy. His books include *The McGraw-Hill Book of Poetry; Women's Voices; Like Season'd Timber: New Essays on George Herbert;* and *Modern American Poets: Their Voices and Visions* (a text to accompany the Public Broadcasting Television series that aired in 1988). With Kraft Rompf, he edited *The McGraw-Hill Book of Poetry* (1993) and *The McGraw-Hill Book of Fiction* (1995). With Janetta Benton he wrote *Arts & Culture: An Introduction to the Humanities* (1998).

For my colleagues,
who have made the reading
and teaching of drama an
ever-increasing pleasure

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Preface

Drama: An Introduction presents an approach to plays that emphasizes reading as an active enterprise involving thought and feeling. It encourages students to value their emotional reactions and their previous experience with life and with language. Students are introduced to interpretation through illustrated discussions of the elements of drama. They are invited to consider why they respond as they do and how their responses change during subsequent readings of a play; they are asked, in short, to relate their experience in reading plays to their experience in living. They are encouraged to see dramatic literature as a significant reflection of life and an imaginative extension of its possibilities.

From first page to last, *Drama* is designed to involve students in the twin acts of reading and analysis. The genre of drama is introduced by a three-part explanatory overview of the reading process. The introduction is organized around the approach to texts outlined in Robert Scholes's *Textual Power* (Yale University Press, 1985), modified and adapted to my own approach to teaching literature. Scholes identifies three aspects of literary response: reading, interpretation, and criticism. The three-part structure of the introduction breaks down as follows:

the experience of drama
the interpretation of drama
the evaluation of drama

Our *experience* of drama concerns our impressions of a work, especially our subjective impressions and emotional responses. *Interpretation* involves intellectual and analytical thinking. And the *evaluation* of drama involves an assessment of aesthetic distinction along with a consideration of a work's social, moral, and cultural values.

Paralleling this schema for the introductory discussion is a similarly organized introduction to writing about drama. This chapter describes how to apply and adapt the approaches presented in the drama introduction. The writing chapter includes examples of student writing, sample topics, documentation procedures, and a general review of the writing process.

For the introduction to drama, I have also provided a separate illustration of the "act of reading": a set of questions in response to the opening scene of Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon* that suggest specific strategies for the critical reading of dramatic literature.

In addition to emphasizing the subjective, analytical, and evaluative aspects of reading plays, *Drama* introduces the traditional elements, such as plot, character, and setting, through discussions tied to specific works. Throughout these discussions, students are asked to return to certain plays and reconsider them from different perspectives.

A word about the choice of plays. The classic and contemporary selections reflect a wide range of styles, voices, subjects, and points of view. Complex and challenging works appear alongside more readily approachable and accessible ones. *Drama,* moreover, contains both in sufficient variety for instructors to assign the more accessible ones for students to read and write about on their own, while reserving the more ambitious selections for class discussion.

This edition of *Drama: An Introduction* is based on the fourth edition of *Literature.* The following features should be highlighted:

- Writing instruction includes a chapter on Writing about Drama and another on Writing with Sources.
- Works are provided with dates of publication or performance.
- The works of two dramatists are highlighted and contextualized. Multiple selections are included for Sophocles and Shakespeare and are accompanied by an extensive biocritical introduction and critical perspectives written by literary scholars.
- An extensive chapter on Critical Perspectives has been included, in which the major schools of literary theory are described and illustrated. Guiding questions and brief bibliographies augment the application of ten critical approaches.

This book represents the cooperative efforts of a number of people. This single-genre spinoff owes its existence ultimately to Steve Pensinger, who encouraged me to develop the first edition of the four-genre full-size book, *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay,* the predecessor of the newly published compact edition. For both this book and for the compact edition of *Literature,* its parent, I have had the pleasure of working with McGraw-Hill colleagues Sarah Moyers, English editor; Alexis Walker, developmental editor; and Maggie Bogovich, project manager. Each provided me with the kind of high-quality professional assistance I have come to expect from McGraw-Hill. It continues to be a pleasure to work with them and with their publishing colleagues.

I have had the additional pleasure of working with Professor Tom Kitts of St. John's University. Professor Kitts has written a practical and graceful instructor's manual, which serves as a rich and rewarding source of practical and provocative classroom applications.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Mary, whose loving assistance enabled me to complete this book on schedule.

ROBERT DIYANNI

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CHAPTER ONE

Reading Plays

Drama, unlike the other literary genres, is a staged art. Plays are written to be performed by actors before an audience. But the plays we wish to see are not always performed. We might have to wait years, for example, to see a production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. We simply might never have an opportunity to see certain plays. A reasonable alternative is to read them with attention to both their theatrical and literary dimensions.

THE EXPERIENCE OF DRAMA

As a literary genre, drama has affinities with fiction and poetry. Like fiction, drama possesses a narrative dimension: a play often narrates a story in the form of a plot. Like fiction, drama relies on dialogue and description, which takes the form of *stage directions,* lines describing characters, scenes, or actions with clues to production. Unlike fiction, however, in which a narrator often mediates between us and the story, there is no such authorial presence in drama. Instead, we hear the words of the characters directly.

Although drama is most like fiction, it shares features with poetry as well. Plays may, in fact, be written in verse: Shakespeare wrote in *blank verse* (unrhymed iambic pentameter), Molière in rhymed couplets. Plays, like lyric poems, are also overheard: we listen to characters expressing their concerns as if there were no audience present. Poems also contain dramatic elements. The dramatic lyrics and monologues of Robert Browning and some of the poems of John Donne portray characters speaking and listening to one another.

Plays may be vehicles of persuasion. Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw frequently used the stage to dramatize ideas and issues. For most of his plays Shaw wrote prefaces in which he discussed the plays' dominant ideas. In drama, ideas possess more primacy than they do in poetry and fiction, something to which

critics of the genre testify. Aristotle, for example, made *thought* one of his six elements of drama; Eric Bentley, a modern critic, entitled one of his books *The Playwright as Thinker.*

But if we look exclusively to the literary aspects of drama, to its poetic and fictional elements, and to its dramatization of ideas, we may fail to appreciate its uniquely theatrical idiom. To gain this appreciation we should read drama with special attention to its performance elements. We can try to hear the voices of characters, and imagine tones and inflections. We can try to see mentally how characters look, where they stand in relation to one another, how they move and gesture. We can read, in short, as armchair directors and as aspiring actors and actresses considering the physical and practical realities of performance.

In doing so we will enrich our experience of the plays we read. Our experience of drama includes more than an intellectual understanding of the ideas particular plays may dramatize. It also includes our emotional reactions to plots and our responses to the interaction of the characters. It encompasses our vision of their dramatic worlds, and it is affected by our changing perceptions and feelings as we read. Our experience of reading drama involves more than a rational and analytic understanding of the text. More inclusive, more integrated, and more imaginative, that experience includes feelings as well as thought, emotional apprehension as well as intellectual comprehension.

As active readers of drama we will bring a special awareness of the ways the written text of a play (its *script*) suggests possibilities for performance. To suggest how we might do this, we include excerpts from three plays, each accompanied by notes and comments. As you read the first excerpt, the opening scene of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House,* consider what the stage directions and cast of characters reveal about the world of the play.

CHARACTERS

TORVALD HELMER, *A LAWYER*
NORA, *HIS WIFE*
DR. RANK
MRS. LINDE
NILS KROGSTAD, *A BANK CLERK*
THE HELMERS' THREE SMALL CHILDREN
ANNE-MARIE, *THEIR NURSE*
HELENE, *A MAID*
A DELIVERY BOY

The action takes place in HELMER'S *residence.*

ACT I

A comfortable room, tastefully but not expensively furnished. A door to the right in the back wall leads to the entryway, another to the left leads to HELMER'S *study. Between these doors, a piano. Midway in the left-hand wall a door, and further back a window. Near the window a round table with an armchair and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, toward the rear a door, and nearer the foreground a porcelain stove with two armchairs and a rocking chair beside it. Between the stove and the side door, a small table. Engravings on the walls. An* etagére *with china figures and other small art objects; a small bookcase with richly bound books; the floor carpeted; a fire burning in the stove. It is a winter day.*

A bell rings in the entryway; shortly after we hear the door being unlocked. NORA *comes into the room, humming happily to herself; she is wearing street clothes and carries an armload of packages, which she puts down on the table to the right. She has left the hall door open; and through it a* DELIVERY BOY *is seen, holding a Christmas tree and a basket which he gives to the* MAID *who let them in.*

NORA: Hide the tree well, Helene. The children mustn't get a glimpse of it till this evening, after it's trimmed. (*To the* DELIVERY BOY, *taking out her purse*) How much?

DELIVERY BOY: Fifty, ma'am.

NORA: There's a crown. No, keep the change. (*The* BOY *thanks her and leaves.* NORA *shuts the door. She laughs softly to herself while taking off her street things. Drawing a bag of macaroons from her pocket, she eats a couple, then steals over and listens at her husband's study door.*) Yes, he's home. (*Hums again as she moves to the table, right.*)

HELMER (*from the study*): Is that my little lark twittering out there?

NORA (*busy opening some packages*): Yes, it is.

HELMER: Is that my squirrel rummaging around?

NORA: Yes!

HELMER: When did my squirrel get in?

NORA: Just now. (*Putting the macaroon bag in her pocket and wiping her mouth*) Do come in, Torvald, and see what I've bought.

HELMER: Can't be disturbed. (*After a moment he opens the door and peers in, pen in hand.*) Bought, you say? All that there? Has the little spendthrift been out throwing money around again?

NORA: Oh, but Torvald, this year we really should let ourselves go a bit. It's the first Christmas we haven't had to economize.

HELMER: But you know we can't go squandering.

NORA: Oh yes, Torvald, we can squander a little now. Can't we? Just a tiny, wee bit. Now that you've got a big salary and are going to make piles and piles of money.

HELMER: Yes—starting New Year's. But then it's a full three months till the raise comes through.

NORA: Pooh! We can borrow that long.

HELMER: Nora! (*Goes over and playfully takes her by the ear*) Are your scatterbrains off again? What if today I borrowed a thousand crowns, and you squandered them over Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a roof tile fell on my head, and I lay there—

NORA (*putting her hand on his mouth*): Oh! Don't say such things!

HELMER: Yes, but what if it happened—then what?

NORA: If anything so awful happened, then it just wouldn't matter if I had debts or not.

HELMER: Well, but the people I'd borrowed from?

NORA: Them? Who cares about them! They're strangers.

HELMER: Nora, Nora, how like a woman! No, but seriously, Nora, you know what I think about that. No debts! Never borrow! Something of freedom's lost—and something of beauty, too—from a home that's founded on borrowing and debt. We've made a brave stand up to now, the two of us; and we'll go right on like that the little while we have to.

NORA (*going toward the stove*): Yes, whatever you say, Torvald.

HELMER (*following her*): Now, now, the little lark's wings mustn't droop. Come on, don't be a sulky squirrel. (*Taking out his wallet*) Nora, guess what I have here.

NORA (*turning quickly*): Money!

HELMER: There, see. (*Hands her some notes*) Good grief, I know how costs go up in a house at Christmastime.

NORA: Ten—twenty—thirty—forty. Oh, thank you, Torvald; I can manage no end on this.

HELMER: You really will have to.

NORA: Oh yes, I promise I will! But come here so I can show you everything I bought. And so cheap! Look, new clothes for Ivar here—and a sword. Here a horse and a trumpet for Bob. And a doll and a doll's bed here for Emmy; they're nothing much, but she'll tear them to bits in no time anyway. And here I have dress material and handkerchiefs for the maids. Old Anne-Marie really deserves something more.

HELMER: And what's in that package there?

NORA (*with a cry*): Torvald, no! You can't see that till tonight!

HELMER: I see. But tell me now, you little prodigal, what have you thought of for yourself?

NORA: For myself? Oh, I don't want anything at all.

HELMER: Of course you do. Tell me just what—within reason—you'd most like to have.

NORA: I honestly don't know. Oh, listen, Torvald—

HELMER: Well?

NORA (*fumbling at his coat buttons, without looking at him*): If you want to give me something, then maybe you could—you could—

HELMER: Come on, out with it.

NORA (*hurriedly*): You could give me money, Torvald. No more than you think you can spare, then one of these days I'll buy something with it.

HELMER: But Nora—

NORA: Oh, please, Torvald darling, do that! I beg you, please. Then I could hang the bills in pretty gilt paper on the Christmas tree. Wouldn't that be fun?

HELMER: What are those little birds called that always fly through their fortunes?

NORA: Oh yes, spendthrifts; I know all that. But let's do as I say, Torvald; then I'll have time to decide what I really need most. That's very sensible, isn't it?

HELMER (*smiling*): Yes, very—that is, if you actually hung onto the money I give you, and you actually used it to buy yourself something, But it goes for the house and for all sorts of foolish things, and then I only have to lay out some more.

NORA: Oh, but Torvald—

HELMER: Don't deny it, my dear little Nora. (*Putting his arm around her waist*) Spendthrifts are sweet, but they use up a frightful amount of money. It's incredible what it costs a man to feed such birds.

NORA: Oh, how can you say that! Really, I save everything I can.

HELMER (*laughing*): Yes, that's the truth. Everything you can. But that's nothing at all.

NORA (*humming, with a smile of quiet satisfaction*): Hm, if you only knew what expenses we larks and squirrels have, Torvald.

HELMER: You're an odd little one. Exactly the way your father was. You're never at a loss for scaring up money; but the moment you have it, it runs right out through your fingers; you never know what you've done with it. Well, one takes you as you are. It's deep in your blood. Yes, these things are hereditary, Nora.

NORA: Ah, I could wish I'd inherited many of Papa's qualities.

HELMER: And I couldn't wish you anything but just what you are, my sweet little lark. But wait; it seems to me you have a very—what should I call it?—a very suspicious look today—

NORA: I do?

HELMER: You certainly do. Look me straight in the eye.

NORA (looking at him): Well?

HELMER (*shaking an admonitory finger*): Surely my sweet tooth hasn't been running riot in town today, has she?

NORA: No. Why do you imagine that?

HELMER: My sweet tooth really didn't make a little detour through the confectioner's?

NORA: No, I assure you, Torvald—

HELMER: Hasn't nibbled some pastry?

NORA: No, not at all.

HELMER: Not even munched a macaroon or two?

NORA: No, Torvald, I assure you, really—

HELMER: There, there now. Of course I'm only joking.

NORA (*going to the table, right*): You know I could never think of going against you.

HELMER: No, I understand that; and you *have* given me your word. (*Going over to her*) Well, you keep your little Christmas secrets to yourself, Nora darling. I expect they'll come to light this evening, when the tree is lit.

NORA: Did you remember to ask Dr. Rank?

HELMER: No. But there's no need for that; it's assumed he'll be dining with us. All the same, I'll ask him when he stops by here this morning. I've ordered some fine wine. Nora, you can't imagine how I'm looking forward to this evening.

NORA: So am I. And what fun for the children, Torvald!

HELMER: Ah, it's so gratifying to know that one's gotten a safe, secure job, and with a comfortable salary. It's a great satisfaction, isn't it?

NORA: Oh, it's wonderful!

HELMER: Remember last Christmas? Three whole weeks before, you shut yourself in every evening till long after midnight, making flowers for the Christmas tree, and all the other decorations to surprise us. Ugh, that was the dullest time I've ever lived through.

NORA: It wasn't at all dull for me.

HELMER (*smiling*): But the outcome *was* pretty sorry, Nora.

NORA: Oh, don't tease me with that again. How could I help it that the cat came in and tore everything to shreds.

HELMER: No, poor thing, you certainly couldn't. You wanted so much to please us all, and that's what counts. But it's just as well that the hard times are past.

NORA: Yes, it's really wonderful.

HELMER: Now I don't have to sit here alone, boring myself, and you don't have to tire your precious eyes and your fair little delicate hands—

NORA (*clapping her hands*): No, is it really true, Torvald, I don't have to? Oh, how wonderfully lovely to hear! (*Taking his arm*) Now I'll tell you just how I've thought we should plan things. Right after Christmas—(*The doorbell rings.*) Oh, the bell. (*Straightening the room up a bit*) Somebody would have to come. What a bore!

HELMER: I'm not at home to visitors, don't forget.

MAID (*from the hall doorway*): Ma'am, a lady to see you—

NORA: All right, let her come in.

MAID (*to* HELMER): And the doctor's just come too.

HELMER: Did he go right to my study?

MAID: Yes, he did.

The first thing we notice is the title: *A Doll House.* Does Ibsen alert us to a central concern of the play with this provocative title? Is it literal or symbolic? As we read the opening scene we test our preliminary sense of the title's implications. As we watch the relationship between Nora and Torvald unfold, we consider what the title suggests about their marriage.

Beneath the title is a list of characters. It's worth pausing over, for a playwright may signal important relationships there. Although only the husband-and-wife relationship of Torvald and Nora is signaled in Ibsen's list, we gain a sense of the play's social milieu from it. We notice that Torvald Helmer is a lawyer and Nils Krogstad a bank clerk, and that another woman and a doctor appear (in addition to minor figures such as a nurse and delivery boy).

We may pass quickly over these details before getting to the script. The first sentences set the scene we must keep in our mind's eye. The italicized words are stage directions (notes to the reader that establish the play's social context). Ibsen's opening stage directions describe the living room of a middle-class family with its piano, books, and pictures. The room represents a familiar world for many readers both in its realistic detail and its bourgeois domesticity.

The manner of Nora's arrival with her packages, the Christmas tree, and basket create an impression of the gaiety typically associated with the Christmas season. The playful quality of Nora's first words—about hiding the Christmas tree—reinforce our sense of this lightheartedness.

As we watch the initial incidents unfold, we begin making inferences and drawing tentative conclusions about the characters. We may wonder, for example, about the large tip Nora gives the delivery boy. Is it a sign of generosity or of extravagance? Does it reflect her state of mind? Does it reveal an inadequate attentiveness to money? Such questions occur almost unconsciously as we read, and the provisional answers we arrive at will be modified, strengthened, or abandoned as we read further.

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