

TYPES OF  
DRAMA

PLAYS  
&  
ESSAYS

FIFTH EDITION

BARNET  
BERMAN  
BURTO



# TYPES OF DRAMA

Plays and Essays

*Fifth Edition*

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# PREFACE

In this edition of *Types of Drama* we have added eight plays: Sophocles's *Antigone*, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Albee's *The Sandbox*, Luce's *Slam the Door Softly*, Merriam, Wagner, and Hofstiss's *Out of Our Fathers' House*, and Wilson's 1987 Pulitzer Prize winner, *Fences*.

We have also added (while retaining Peter Arnott's "The Script and the Stage") two essays on the play in the theater, and we have amplified our section called "Writing About Drama" so that it now discusses not only writing reviews and analyses but also writing an original scene.

The *plays*, apart from the first five, are arranged chronologically. We begin with *A Doll's House*, to introduce students to "The Language of Drama," and then follow it with Clare Boothe Luce's modern one-act reinterpretation of Ibsen. Next, following an introductory essay called "The Nature of Drama," we print one tragedy (*Oedipus*), one comedy (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), and one tragicomedy (*The Sandbox*), thus giving students an idea of the major types of drama. The remaining twenty plays, from *Antigone* and *Lysistrata* to *'night*, *Mother* and *Fences*, are given in chronological order. (Instructors who prefer to group the plays by genres can, of course, easily do so.) The plays cover a range of years and of types, but in no case were they chosen only to represent a period or a type. All were chosen because of their inherent value. Those not written in English are represented in what we believe are the best modern translations.

The *commentaries* on the plays are relatively short. They are not attempts to explicate the plays but contain, we think, some useful and relevant points that will also be helpful with other plays. Thus, the commentary on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* includes a discussion of two traditions of comedy, "critical" comedy and "romantic" comedy, material that is also relevant to other plays in the book, including *The Misanthrope* and *Arms and the Man*. Similarly, the commentary on *The Glass Menagerie* goes beyond the play by discussing presentational theater, a topic relevant to almost all drama before Ibsen. But even those commentaries that are sharply focused on a given play do not seek to utter the last word. On the contrary, they seek to provide material that will stimulate discussion in class or that may be the topic of a writing assignment. The *topics for discussion* that follow each commentary are similarly designed.

The anthologized *essays* fall into two groups: one group (the authors range from Aristotle to Susanne Langer) consists of relatively theoretical writings on the nature of tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy; the second group, emphasizing drama as theater rather than as literature, contains essays by directors. Because these discussions are fairly general, almost any essay may be read in conjunction with almost any play.

The *glossary* is a dictionary of two hundred basic critical and historical terms. Though some of the definitions are brief, many are fairly long. Students and instructors have told us that the glossary can actually be read with interest and that the definitions, far from being perfunctory, are genuinely helpful.

The *illustrations* show the plays in performance; further, we have included illustrations of Greek and Elizabethan theaters in an effort to assist students in imagining the plays on unfamiliar stages.

Having briefly described the book, we want (before we turn to the pleasant job of acknowledging our debts) to offer a comment on the theater in the second half of the twentieth century. The 1950s saw the growth of the theater of the absurd; the mid-1960s, in the United States, saw the birth of a very different sort of drama, an affirmative drama that can be called the theater of commitment. Opposition to the war in Vietnam was one great source of commitment; a second source was the civil rights movement, which stimulated black dramatists to affirm black power. Inspired especially by the black power movement, other movements soon developed: gay theater, women's theater, Chicano theater, Asian-American theater, and Native American theater. The products of these movements are highly diverse, and it is too early to say that they constitute a substantial body of enduring works; many of the plays were frankly designed as a means of consciousness-raising. Still, one notices a new eloquence, not an attempt (necessarily doomed) to revive Shakespeare's poetry, but a prose more eloquent or more confident than, say, the language of Albee's characters. In *Types of Drama* this new confidence in language is seen most clearly in *Out of Our Fathers' House*, by Merriam, Wagner, and Hofsis, in which six women talk lucidly and compellingly. It seems clear that today's dramatists have a new faith in human beings, a faith not simply that people will endure but that they can talk meaningfully. Beckett's characters showed their strength in persistently waiting for Godot; the new theater's characters show their strength in asserting themselves, not as tragic heroes demanding that life make sense, and certainly not as comic figures making an amusing spectacle of themselves, but as men and women on the way to attaining the dignity that is rightfully theirs.

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# THE LANGUAGE OF DRAMA



Although a play usually tells a story, “the medium of drama,” as Ezra Pound observed, “is not words, but persons moving about on a stage using words.” Take Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* as an example. The gist of the story is this: Nora, without her husband knowing it, forged a document so that she and her husband could spend a year in Italy; this trip to a warm climate was necessary to preserve her husband’s life. When Torvald, the husband, learns the truth and is in danger of being exposed as the husband of a forger, instead of either taking the blame or at least standing by Nora, to Nora’s amazement he savagely turns on her. When the forged document is returned, so that it can be destroyed rather than made public, he exclaims, “I’m saved,” at which point Nora asks, “And I?” Torvald forgives Nora, but Nora now understands that Torvald has never loved her but has only played with her, treating her like a doll and keeping her from making something of her life. Finding that she no longer loves him and that therefore she cannot continue to live with him, at the end of the play she leaves the house for no specified destination. The last thing we hear is the sound of the door closing behind her.

This is moderately interesting, and it has some roots in fact. Ibsen actually knew a woman who had forged a check to pay for a trip that her husband’s health required. When the husband learned the truth, he turned on her and had her committed to an asylum, though later, for the sake of their children, he allowed her to return to their home. Ibsen, of course, added a good deal and changed the ending; but even if he had not made these changes, a play about this family would—if it were any good—be very different from an account in *Time* or *People*, because, as Pound says, a play is made not out of words but out of “persons moving about on a stage using words.”

Let’s begin with the stage and its setting. When the curtain goes up on a performance of *A Doll’s House*, the audience sees “a pleasant living room, tastefully but not expensively furnished.” Additional details, such as “etchings on the walls,” and “a small bookcase with deluxe editions,” tell us much about the kind of people who live here. We shall learn more about these people when we see the clothes that they wear and hear the words that they speak, but even now—from seeing their living room—we know that they are people who hold the conventional middle-class values. The “deluxe editions” in the bookcase, for example, are more for show than for reading. SETTING

In some plays there are several sets—sometimes in sharp contrast—but in *A Doll’s House* there is only one set, and perhaps we come to feel that this omnipresent room is a sort of prison that stifles its inhabitants or, as the title of the play implies, that this room keeps its inhabitants at a distance from the realities of life. At the end of the play, Nora escapes from this box and enters the real world. We might look, too, at the ways in which some of the furniture and the properties work in the play. Very early, when Torvald begins to lecture Nora about incurring debts, she “walks over toward the stove.” It is scarcely too subtle to conclude that she is seeking a place of warmth or security when confronted by Torvald’s chilling words. We may not *consciously* come to this conclusion, but



*A Doll's House*: setting as a revelation of values. (Photograph: University of Minnesota Theatre.)

that doesn't matter. Indeed, later in this act, Torvald, sitting near the stove, says quite naturally, "Ah, it's nice and warm in here."

Or consider the use Ibsen makes of the Christmas tree. In Act I, when Nora's world is still relatively undisturbed, the tree, adorned with candles and flowers, is in the center of the stage. By the end of this act Nora is terrified, and when the curtain goes up for the second act, we see the tree thrust into a corner, "stripped, shabby-looking, with burnt-down candles." Again, we may not consciously conclude that Ibsen, through the tree, is telling us something about Nora, but surely the tree—at first gay, then forlorn—somehow has an impact on us.

**LIGHTING** Speaking of candles, or of lighting, in the second act a stage direction tells us, as Nora's terror grows, "Darkness begins to fall during the following scene." Later in the scene, when Dr. Rank confesses he loves Nora and thereby adds to her confusion, Nora seeks to regain her composure by ordering the maid to bring in a lamp—a natural desire, given her sense that she is threatened sexually, but

also a symbol of illumination, for now the secret is out in the open. Finally, in the last act, when Nora forcefully explains to Torvald that she now sees things clearly, they are sitting on opposite sides of a table with a lighted lamp on it.

The setting of even a realistic play, then, including the furniture and the lighting, is a means by which a playwright communicates. Another realistic play, *The Cherry Orchard*, juxtaposes the orchard (the dying aristocratic way of life) with telephone poles and a town (the new industrial way of life). In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's "fragile-seeming home" is surrounded by "a solid vault of apartment houses," Miller thereby conveying the vulnerability of the individual.

A bare stage, too (much used in contemporary drama; for example, in the plays of Beckett), by virtue of its barrenness says something about the human being's isolation or alienation. Although one frequently hears that the Elizabethan stage was bare and that Shakespeare's plays are most effective on a bare stage, in fact the Elizabethan stage was an elaborate piece of architecture, suggestive of a completely ordered universe, and when appropriate the stage was decorated with banners. But it could be bleak when bleakness was required. At the end of the second act of *King Lear*, Gloucester tells us what we are to imagine: "Alack, the night comes on, and the high winds / Do sorely ruffle. For many miles about / There's scarce a bush." Again, this locale says something about the impoverished people who move in it.

In returning to *A Doll's House*, and to Ezra Pound's comment on the nature of drama, let us continue for a moment to talk about the ways in which drama even without dialogue says something. Costumes tell us a good deal, on the stage as in life. They do not necessarily tell the truth about their wearers, but they tell us what the wearers want us to believe. If, on the street, we see a man who is wearing workman's clothes, we conclude that he may be a workman—or that for some reason (say, political or sexual) he wants us to think that he is a workman; in any case, the clothes make a statement, conscious or not.

COSTUME

In the first act, Nora wears ordinary clothing, but in the middle of the second act she puts on "a long, many-colored shawl" when she frantically rehearses her tarantella. The shawl, of course, is supposed to be appropriate to the Italian dance, but surely its multitude of colors also helps to express Nora's conflicting emotions, her near hysteria, expressed too in the fact that "her hair comes loose and falls down over her shoulders," but "She doesn't notice." The shawl and her disheveled hair, then, *speaks* to us as clearly as the dialogue does.

In the middle of the third act, after the party and just before the showdown, Nora appears in her "Italian costume," and Helmer wears "evening dress" under an open black cloak. She is dressed for a masquerade (her whole life has been a masquerade, it turns out), and Torvald's formal suit and black cloak help to express the stiffness and the blight that have forced her to present a false front throughout their years of marriage. A little later, after Nora sees that she has never really known her husband for the selfish creature he is, she leaves the stage, and when she returns she is "in an everyday dress." The pretense is over.



She is no longer Torvald's "doll." When she finally leaves the stage—leaving the house—she "Wraps her shawl around her." This is not the "many-colored shawl" she used in rehearsing the dance, but the "big, black shawl" she wears when she returns from the dance. The blackness of this shawl helps to express the death of her old way of life; Nora is now aware that life is not child's play.

Ibsen did not, of course, invent the use of costumes as dramatic language; it goes back to the beginnings of drama, and one has only to think of Hamlet's "inky cloak," or of Lear tearing off his clothing, or of the fresh clothing in which Lear is garbed after his madness in order to see how eloquently costumes can speak. To this can be added the matter of disguises—for example, Edgar's disguise in *King Lear*—which are removed near the end of plays, when the truth is finally revealed and the characters can be fully themselves. In short, the removal of disguises *says* something.

#### GESTURES

Gestures, too, are a part of the language of drama. Helmer "playfully pulls [Nora's] ear," showing his affection; Nora claps her hands; Mrs. Linde (an old friend of Nora's) "tries to read but seems unable to concentrate," and so forth. All such gestures clearly and naturally convey states of mind. One of the most delightful and revealing gestures in the play occurs when, in the third act, Helmer demonstrates to Mrs. Linde the ugliness of knitting ("Look here: arms pressed close to the sides") and the elegance of embroidering ("... with your right [hand] you move the needle—like this—in an easy, elongated arc"). None of his absurd remarks throughout the play is quite so revealing of his absurdity as is this silly demonstration.

Some gestures, or stage directions that imply gestures, are a bit more complex. For example, when Nora "walks cautiously over to the door to the study and listens," this direction conveys Nora's fear that her husband may detect her foibles—or even her crime. We read this stage direction almost at the start of the play, when we do not yet know who is who or what is what, but we do know, from this gesture alone, that Nora is not at ease even in her own home. And when Mrs. Linde sees her former lover, Krogstad, she "starts, looks, turns away toward the window," a natural enough reaction but one that indicates her desire to escape from this confining box-set. Similarly, when Nora "wildly" dances during her rehearsal in the second act, the action of course indicates the terrible agitation in her mind. One other, quieter example: in Act III, when the dying Dr. Rank for the last time visits Nora in order to gain comfort, she lights his cigar, and a moment later Rank replies—these are his last words—"And thanks for the light." Thus we not only hear words about a cigar, but we *see* an act of friendship, a flash of light in this oppressive household.

#### SOUND EFFECTS

Like the setting, the costumes, and the gestures, the sound effects in a play are important. Footsteps on stairs, or the swish and slight thud of a letter dropping into a mailbox on the door, can have an electrifying effect. In *A Doll's House* the music of the tarantella communicates Nora's frenzy, but the most famous sound effect is reserved for the very end of the play, when Nora walks out on Helmer: "From downstairs comes the sound of a heavy door slamming shut."