武汉大学英文系英美文学系列教材

英国戏剧选读

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程雪猛　编著

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Part One Introduction

In Western countries, scholars generally believe that drama arose from religious ceremonial and had its beginning in two sources: the desire to imitate and the desire to worship. The desire to imitate, or the mimetic instinct, is one of man's oldest and most basic characteristics, which is confined to no single nation: it is universal in its appeal and reveals itself as one of the most primitive of human emotions. As we all know that children learn to walk by seeing others walk, and learn to talk by making the sounds that others do. We learn to play musical instruments through example. We imitate the actions of others when we are unsure how to act in social situations. We then expand our areas of learning or accompaniment by imitating what we did previously and trying to perfect it.

Imitation or action can also be a means of communication. When a person tells others about an experience he has had, he often pantomimes some of the actions he took. Thus, he is imitating a previous situation to make it clear to others. When you are angry at someone and tell another person about the situation that caused the anger, your voice often imitates that of the person who made you angry. However, your imitation is selective in that the worst qualities of the person's voice are used. Then they are heightened.

It is believed that before spoken language was developed, primal man communicated largely through action and imitation. In this way, he could tell others about situations of which he was a part, and he could demonstrate to others what he planned to do or what he wanted them to do. From this basic instinct to imitate, man not only could imitate what actually did happen to him, but what could happen. And also the primitive races often represented the deeds of their gods and heroes at the yearly festivals. Thus the original drama was but an old story retold to the eye, a story put into action by living performers. Men and women imagined themselves in the semblance of attendants on a god, even took upon themselves the god-form in its majesty, to re-enact the sacred stories. In primitive tribes of today, we still can see the rituals that developed. One member of the tribe plays an animal with horns and a mask, while another assumes the appearance of a supernatural being. Out of such ritual or imitation came worship of a god. The medicine man assumed a nonhuman appearance to ward off evil spirits, and the priest of the tribe imitated the actions of the gods to please them and to show that the people feared and loved them. As we can see in many historical materials that Greek drama grew out of the primitive rituals performed in conjunction with the three annual festivals dedicated to Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of fertility, regeneration and wine. Greek tragedy came from the Dionysian rites dealing with life and death while its comedy developed from those phases of the Dionysian rites which dealt with the theme of fertility. And the medieval drama arose out of rites commemorating the birth and the resurrection of Christ.

I. Types of Drama

No one denies that tragedy and comedy are the two major subgenres of drama. On the basis of a comprehensive analysis of dramas as a whole, it is quite clear that there exist a serious, gloomy play full of sorrow and a delightful, light play filled with vigour, which have essential and obvious differences. From the very beginning, they were called "tragedy" and "comedy".

1.1. Tragedy

Tragedy, as a literary term, refers to a drama in which a heroic protagonist meets an unhappy or calamitous end, brought about by some fatal flaw of character, by circumstances outside his or her control, or simply by destiny. According to Aristotle, "a tragedy... is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing *pity* and *fear*, wherewith to accomplish its *catharsis* of such emotions."

It is believed that Greek tragedy emerged from the cult of Dionysus, god of fertility, wine, and poetry. At first, chants and dances were performed in honor of the god and his attendants by a chorus whose leader, the coryphaeus, engaged in chanted dialogue with the group. The latter may have worn goatskins, and it is possible that the word tragedy derives from a Greek word meaning "goat-song." In the middle of the 6th century BC, the Athenian Thespis created tragedy when he replaced the coryphaeus by a distinct actor, the protagonist, who, being masked, could actually play several roles if he withdrew to the wings whenever the chorus performed alone. The great innovation of Aeschylus was to introduce a second actor, so that now a dialogue could take place between two individuals in addition to the dialogue between actor and chorus. Sophocles and Euripides used a third actor, and with this the formal evolution of Greek tragedy came to an end. The above-mentioned Athenian dramatists were involved in their dramatic creation of classical tragedy. Essentially the spirit of this writing was that inevitable suffering overwhelms the characters, and yet the characters maintain their dignity in the face of this suffering, and prove their greatness by doing so. Greek tragedy arose out of their religious interpretation of the nature of human destiny. Greek tragedy was characterized by adherence to the unities of time, place and action; by tragic heroes who usually sacrificed themselves to salvage posterity; by a chorus that made philosophic comments, sometimes serving as the playwright's mouthpiece; by a fatalistic vision undergirding themes of retribution and the displeasure of the gods; and by formal and poetic language.

Of Roman tragedy—closely modeled on that of Greece—only the works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca influenced later epochs. Compared with Greek tragedy, Roman tragedy seems second-rate—especially the blood-and-thunder tragedies of Seneca, even if they did follow the unities and certain other mechanism.

When Christianity prevailed over Western Europe, a much more hopeful interpretation of human destiny dominated the thought of writers, and tragedy, in the Greek sense, became difficult to imagine and unnatural: if good men suffer in this world, they are rewarded in Heaven, and this is not tragic; wicked men who happen to suffer in this world may be damned in the next, but this is also not tragic because they are wicked. Hence medieval tragedy was on the whole reduced to the conception of the Wheel of Fortune—that chance in this world is apt to take men from prosperity to misfortune, whatever their spiritual merits.

The short duration of the brilliant phase of creation in Greece is matched by the brevity of other great periods of tragic drama in Western civilization: Elizabethan England. In the late 16th century the tragic vision of human experience was rediscovered by some English dramatists, notably by Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, because of whom tragedy rose to prominence again during the English Renaissance. Insofar as it had a literary ancestry, this was not the tragedy of the ancient Greeks, but the comparatively debased imitation of it by the Roman poets, especially Seneca, which helped to give rise to Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy or "Tragedy of Blood". More interesting was the growth of conceptions of human destiny which did not usurp the Christian conception, but existed side by side with it, as an alternative, or perhaps rather as a complementary, vision. Thus perhaps the first important English tragedy should be Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in which the hero forgoes eternal happiness after death for the sake of earthly ecstasy; Marlowe sets in opposition the Christian doctrine of the soul and the Renaissance delight in earthly experience. *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare for the first time makes the task of revenge a genuine moral dilemma, is perhaps the next. The best known achievements of English tragic drama are Shakespeare's five plays: *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. They have in common that the hero's hope of some form of supreme earthly happiness collapses into terrible misery, brought about less by the hero's character than through the nature of earthly reality of which his character forms a part. Elizabethan tragedy dared to depart from the classical unities and added comic relief. Among Shakespeare's contemporaries and his successors, several dramatists wrote distinguished plays in the tragic style, among them are listed Middleton and Webster.

After 1660, numerous attempts were made to write tragedy in the Greek style or in the neoclassical French style, and classical tragedy was revived in France by the playwrights Corneille and Racine. During the neoclassical period in England "heroic tragedies" reflected only a slavishness to classical mechanics, but they lacked conviction, and the best of which might be Dryden's *All for Love*. 19^{th}-century poets also made various attempts to revive the Shakesperean mode of tragedy. Of these Shelley's *The Cenci* is the only noteworthy example.

Today a tragedy is still taken to be a work of high seriousness arousing the audience's deepest emotions. A protagonist is required for whom the audience can feel a fundamental sympathy. His or her downfall is the inevitable result of some major enterprise or decision; it is not caused by chance events. The downfall must shake the audience deeply and be felt as important.

In modern times a recurring issue has been whether truly tragic literature is still possible. Traditionally, tragedy had attached a terrifying importance to the destiny of humanity. Now it is asked whether in a debunking and unheroic age such a vision of human stature can be sustained. More and more people were appealed to comedy, perhaps as an escape from the real-life tragedy all around us. Still some of the plays written by Synge and Yeats were genuinely remarkable and original tragedies, but their scale is unabitious. However, in the 1960's the work of such dramatists as Pinter, Osborne and Arden has revived dramatic tragedy in a more recognizable form.

1.2. Comedy

All literary forms contain comic elements, but the term comedy is here used primarily to describe a genre of humorous plays that deal with ordinary or domestic events and end happily. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle said that comedy depicts "people as worse than they are," tragedy as "better." Tragedy represented the sufferings of noble characters in order to stir pity in the audience, whereas comedy represented inferior people whose actions arouse laughter without causing pain. Comedy, later critics have said, may involve laughter at a character who is a fool, a coward, a miser, or zany, or laughter with the rogue or trickster who upsets the normal social order for a time. Some modern theories of comedy have stressed the superiority that the audience feels to the character who is the cause of their laughter.

The earliest Greek comedy consisted of loose episodes, choruses, and ritual dialogue in honour of Dionysus, the god of fertility. It was not until the advent Aristophanes that Greek Old Comedy developed plot structure along with brilliant wit, repartee, and satire. Well-known satirical plays of Aristophanes are *The Clouds* which mocks Socrates and other philosophers, *Lysistrata*, *The Frogs* and *The Birds* contain animal choruses that parody tragic language and themes. Middle comedy is thought to have softened this satire by turning to a fantasy world of gods and heroes, but no examples have survived. New comedy is known only from some fragments of the plays of Menander; it portrayed contemporary manners and domestic themes, focusing on romance. His comedy was characterized by much less wit and satire and by more clichés of plot and characterization, especially the character of humours. There now appeared such stereotypes as the braggart soldier, the libertine master, and the insolent slave. This kind of play, along with the stereotyped comedy-of-errors plot, was soon imitated by the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, who flourished in the 2^{nd} century BC.

The comedies of Terence and Plautus, modeled on Greek new comedy, almost invariably concern the attempts of young lovers to overcome obstacles posed by an old father or some rich and corrupt person. They are often aided by a wily slave who outwits such stock characters as the pimp and the braggart soldier. These plays contain no social satire; the characters are practical in their desire for wealth and pleasure, and the happy ending neutralizes any hint of moral blame.

During the early Christian era, classical comedy practically disappeared, no doubt because the early Church fathers regarded the theatre as frivolous and irreverent. Nevertheless, comedy managed to survive in certain folk plays and festivals, especially in the farces and morality plays of the Middle Ages. Nor was this comedy always as crude as is usually supposed, even if crudity and slapstick did characterize a few of the best-known craft cycle plays and later, in the 16^{th} century, the Italian Comedia Dell' Arte. The actors wore masks and played stock roles in improvised scenes of farce and slapstick.

During the English Renaissance, comedy revived, and was developed in several forms. John Heywood wrote some of the best-known interludes. Nicholas Udall and John Lyly revived the classical New Comedy, as did Shakespeare. *The Comedy of Errors* of William Shakespeare is based on Plautus's *The Menaechmus Twins*, but his other comedies are remarkable for their extension and variation of classical plots. *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are lyrical plays that add serious themes to the romantic plot of classical comedy. *Measure for Measure* is darkly satirical, and *The Tempest* is a play in which love and forgiveness reestablish morality. Shakespeare's tragedies and histories include comic scenes and represent a Renaissance innovation, tragicomedy. Shakespeare also created such humour-characters as the gluttonous Falstaff and the egregious fool Malvolio. Ben Jonson developed the comedy of humours—creating characters, later to be stereotyped, like the parasite and the woman-hater. Ben Jonson's "comedy of humours" is satirical; *Every Man in His Humor* and *The Alchemist* focus on characters dominated by obsessions, or "humours." Both Jonson and Shakespeare raised their characters above classical stereotypes by adding a good many individualistic traits and bringing in much local London colour. Shakespeare's genius prompted him to range even further.

The closing of the London theatres by the Puritans in 1642 produced an 18-year hiatus in comedy, but it resumed with éclat at the Restoration. English Restoration drama produced brilliant, albeit less elegant, comedies of this kind. Comedies written by George Etherege, William Wycherly and William Congreve were marked by wit, brilliant repartee, and much sexual innuendo. Because Restoration comedies satirized contemporary manners, mores, sports, and pastimes, they came to be called "comedies of manners". Because of their urbane wit, they also became known as "high comedy", to distinguish them from the "low comedy" and boffoonery of the interlude. The comedy of manners retained its popularity through most of the 18th-century, especially with the often-produced plays and those by Oliver Goldsmith and R. B. Sheridan. The comedy returned to Roman plots in which love is an excuse for humorous misunderstandings and memorable comic figures.

Comedy suffered an eclipse at the beginning of the 19th-century, especially during the early years of the Victorian Age. But after the middle of the century it returned, at first somewhat cautiously, and then hilariously, in the operattas of W. S. Gilbert and A. S. Sullivan and in the sophisticated plays of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde, is a comedy of manners that satirizes middle-class respectability but makes fun of its own aristocratic dandyism. *Man and Superman*, by George Bernard Shaw, is a comedy of ideas in which middle-class notions are demolished but whose hero is undercut by his own self-satisfaction. At the same time there appeared the sentimental comedies of James M. Barrie and the Irish comedies of J. M. Synge and of Sean O'Casey.

Celebrated comedies, including musical comedies came into being in the first half of the 20th-century. Recent experimental comedy includes the Theatre of the Absurd in which comedy has again combined with tragedy in *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, treating spiritual emptiness and pessimism with comic absurdity.

Contemporary comedic dramatists continue along the path marked by Beckett and Ionesco. They include the British playwrights Harold Pinter and Alan Ayckbourn.

Ⅱ. Elements of Drama

Every play presents its audience a story which is unfolded through the dialogue and actions of its characters, from which we can definitely say that an appropriate understanding of the four dramatic elements—story, dialogue, action and character—is the essence of the appreciation and evaluation of drama.

2.1. Dialogue

A theatrical production without a dialogue can only be regarded as a mime or ballet, but it is never a play. A play can give us talk and characters without much action, or talk and action without strong characters, but it cannot give us characters and action without talk. It is all talk in drama.

Dramatic dialogue is very different from the kind of dialogue that makes up so much of our everyday lives. Actual conversation is full of hesitations, pauses, fragments, misunderstandings, and repetitions. The communication itself is often as much a product of inflections, gestures, and facial expressions as it is of the spoken word. It depends so much on innuendo and allusions to previous conversations that an outsider is often unable to determine the exact meaning of a discussion heard out of context.

In contrast, important conversations in drama slash past trivial details and strike the lure with vigor and directness. Dramatic dialogue ordinarily carries with it still another burden; it must include sufficient background information to fix the time, place, and circumstances of the action firmly in the mind of the audience. Dramatic dialogue is not, however, an easy tool to use. A playwright, unlike a novelist, cannot simply halt proceedings to introduce formal character sketches or to set a scene; nor can a playwright exert the same direct control over the story.

With the purpose of full appreciation of a play, we must pay attention to the following language conventions in the dialogue of the play: the use of verse and prose, the way characters speak of themselves, the way in which rulers are spoken of, the distinction between "you" and "thou", the soliloquy, and the aside.

2.2. Story

Like a typical short story, the plot of nearly every play contains five structural elements: exposition, complication, crisis, falling action, and resolution. Dramatic plots are more regular in their use of the five elements.

Exposition: In drama the exposition is that part of the story-line which provides essential background information, introduces the cast, begins the characterization, and initiates the action, all of which the audience must know to appreciate what happens next. The conventional method of sharing all this with the audience is through a messenger, a talkative servant or an old friend of the family. In the early 1900's, the chief instrument for communicating exposition in a play was a telephone in the hands of a maid or butler; comtemporary playwrights convey exposition more subtly, without delaying the action of the play.

Complication: The complication refers to the introduction and development of the conflicts in a play. In any rising action, the tension is a scene arises from the conflict or perspective conflict between a character and various obstacles. And in a given scene or episode, this conflict is often partially resolved. Each complication tends to be more suspensive than its predessessor since it contributes to a cumulative force. Another kind of complication in the plot or story-line of drama is a suspensive incident or development that confronts characters with crucial decisions. It commences when one or more of the main characters first become aware of an impending difficulty or when their relationships first begin to change.

Crisis: The crisis, or turning point of the play, occurs at the