PART

IV

Drama

Drama usually tells an intense story by means of a fairly small number of characters. It can thus be contrasted both with the novel and with poetry. The novel tends to use a large number of characters and to cover a substantial period of time, thereby in some measure showing a picture of a society as well as of individuals; poetry, at the other extreme, tends to reveal the thoughts and emotions of a single individual. Drama usually gives us a heightened sense of life as we experience it daily—that is, of one character impinging on another, of actions having consequences, and of lives as comically or tragically interconnected. To quote Alfred Hitchcock, "Drama is life with the dull bits cut out."

Admittedly, some playwrights have used the stage as a platform for exploring ideas rather than as a way of showing intense representations of lives interacting, and Arthur Miller (1915–2005), shown here in his study, is among the playwrights who are sometimes said to be intellectuals. He indeed commented abundantly on the nature of society, both in essays and within the plays themselves (e.g., in *All My Sons* Chris Keller tells his mother, "There's a universe of people outside, and you're responsible to it"), but the fact remains that Miller is especially valued not for Big Ideas but because he gives us, through passionate characters, a sense that we are witnessing lives and human relationships in their most essential forms. Miller wished to make us think, but chiefly he makes us feel, and that is perhaps enough for a playwright to do. He cared deeply about social issues but one of the wisest things he said is not about any social issue but about the nature of drama itself: "The theater is above all else an instrument of passion."

Arthur Miller was born in New York, the son of Jewish immigrants from Austria. Miller went to the University of Michigan, where he first majored in journalism but then switched to English. As an undergraduate he won an award for playwrighting—one of the judges was Susan Glaspell, author of *Trifles* (see page 845)—and after graduation (1938) he returned to New York, where he wrote some radio plays and some unsuccessful stage plays. A novel, *Focus* (1945), was well received, and with *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *The Crucible* (1953), his reputation as a playwright was firmly established. His leftist views, however, caused difficulty: Subjected to questioning by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s, he was convicted of contempt of Congress, but the conviction was overturned in 1958. Miller was widely regarded, in England and the rest of Europe as well as in the United States, as America's most important dramatist.

CHAPTER

29

How to Read a Play

Thinking About the Language of Drama

The earlier parts of this book have dealt with fiction and poetry. A third chief literary type is drama, texts written to be performed.

A play is written to be seen and to be heard. We go to *see* a play in a theater (*theater* is derived from a Greek word meaning "to watch"), but in the theater we also *hear* it because we become an audience (*audience* is derived from a Latin word meaning "to hear"). Hamlet was speaking the ordinary language of his day when he said, "We'll hear a play tomorrow." When we read a play rather than see and hear it in a theater, we lose a good deal. We must see it in the mind's eye and hear it in the mind's ear.

When reading a play, it is not enough mentally to hear the lines. We must try to see the characters, costumed and moving within a specified setting, and we must try to hear not only their words but their tone, their joy or hypocrisy or tentativeness or aggression. Our job is much easier when we are in the theater and we have only to pay attention to the performers; as readers on our own, however, we must do what we can to perform the play in the theater of our minds.

If as a reader you develop the following principles into habits, you will get far more out of a play than if you read it as though it were a novel consisting only of dialogue.

1. *Pay attention to the* ***list of characters*** *and carefully read whatever* ***descriptions*** *the playwright has provided.* Early dramatists, such as Shakespeare, did not provide much in the way of description ("Othello, the Moor" or "Ariel, an airy spirit" is about as much as we find in Elizabethan texts), but later playwrights often are very forthcoming. Here, for instance, is Tennessee Williams introducing us to Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie.* (We give only the beginning of his longish description.)

   > *Amanda Wingfield,* the mother. A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place.

   And here is Susan Glaspell introducing us to all the characters in her one-act play, *Trifles:*

   > . . . the Sheriff comes in, followed by the County Attorney and Hale. The Sheriff and Hale are men in middle life, the County Attorney is a

> young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the Sheriff's Wife, [Mrs. Peters] first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face. Mrs. Hale is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly and stand close together near the door.

Glaspell's description of her characters is not nearly so explicit as Tennessee Williams's, but Glaspell does reveal much to a reader. What do we know about the men? They differ in age, they are bundled up, and they "go at once to the stove." What do we know about the women? Mrs. Peters is slight, and she has a "nervous face"; Mrs. Hale is "larger" but she too is "disturbed." The women enter "slowly," and they "stand close together near the door." In short, the men, who take over the warmest part of the room, are more confident than the women, who nervously huddle together near the door. It's a man's world.

2. *Pay attention to* ***gestures*** *and* ***costumes*** *that are specified in stage directions or are implied by the dialogue.* We have just seen how Glaspell distinguishes between the men and the women by what they do—the men take over the warm part of the room, the women stand insecurely near the door. Most dramatists from the late nineteenth century to the present have been fairly generous with their stage directions, but when we read the works of earlier dramatists we often have to deduce the gestures from the speeches. For instance, although the texts of Shakespeare's day have an occasional direction, such as "Enter Hamlet reading on a book," "Leaps in the grave," and "in scuffling, they change rapiers," such directions are rare. In reading Shakespeare, we must, again, see the action *in the mind's eye* (a phrase from *Hamlet*, by the way) Here, for instance, are Horatio's words (1.1.130–31) when he sees the Ghost:

> But soft, behold! Lo, where it comes again!
> I'll cross it, though it blast me. [*It spreads his arms.*] Stay, *illusion!*

As a footnote indicates, the "his" in the stage direction is the Ghost's; today we would say "its." There is no doubt about what the Ghost does, but what does Horatio do when he says "I'll cross it"? Conceivably "I'll cross it" means "I'll confront it; I'll stand in its path," and Horatio then walks up to the Ghost. Or perhaps the words mean "I'll make the sign of the cross, to protect myself from this creature from another world." If so, does Horatio make the sign of the cross with his hand, or does he perhaps hold up his sword, an object that by virtue of the sword guard at right angles to the blade is itself a cross? The words "Stay, *illusion*" similarly must be accompanied by a gesture; perhaps Horatio reaches out, to try to take hold of the Ghost.

Or consider the first reunion of Hamlet and Horatio, in the second scene (1.2.160–61) of the play:

> HORATIO. Hail to your lordship!
> HAMLET. I am glad to see you well.
> Horatio!—or I do forget myself.

One cannot be positive, but it seems that the melancholy Hamlet, hearing a greeting ("Hail to your lordship"), at first replies with routine politeness ("I am glad to see you well") and, when an instant later he recognizes that this

greeting comes from an old friend whom he has not seen for a while, he responds with an enthusiastic "Horatio!" and perhaps with an embrace.

In addition to thinking about gestures, don't forget the costumes that the characters wear. Costumes identify the characters as soldiers or kings or farmers or whatever, and changes of costume can be especially symbolic.

Costumes are always important, because they tell us something about the people who wear them. As even the fatuous Polonius knows, "the apparel oft proclaims the man." In *Hamlet*, the use of symbolic costume is evident; Hamlet is dressed in black (we hear of his "nighted color" and his "inky cloak"), a color that sets him apart from the courtiers, who presumably are dressed in colorful robes. Later in the play, when, having escaped from a sea journey that was supposed to end in his death, Hamlet is seen in the graveyard, perhaps he wears the "sea gown" that he mentions, and we feel that he is now a more energetic character, freed from his constricting suit of mourning.

3. *Keep in mind the* ***kind of theater*** *for which the play was written.* The plays in this book were written for various kinds of theaters. Sophocles, author of *Antigone* and *King Oedipus,* wrote for the ancient Greek theater, essentially a space where performers acted in front of an audience seated on a hillside. (See the photo on page 909.) This theater was open to the heavens, with a structure representing a palace or temple behind the actors, in itself a kind of image of a society governed by the laws of the state and the laws of the gods. Moreover, the chorus entered the playing space by marching down the side aisles, close to the audience, thus helping to unite the world of the audience and of the players. On the other hand, the audience in most modern theaters sits in a darkened area and looks through a proscenium arch at performers who move in a boxlike setting. The box set of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century is, it often seems, an appropriate image of the confined lives of the unheroic characters of the play.
4. *If the playwright describes a location, try to* ***envision the set*** *clearly.* Glaspell, for instance, tells us a good deal about the set. We quote only the first part.

> The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order. . . .

These details about a gloomy and disordered kitchen may seem to be mere realism—after all, the play has to take place *somewhere*—but it turns out that the disorder and, for that matter, the gloominess are extremely important. You'll have to read the play to find out why.

Another example of a setting that provides important information is Arthur Miller's scene descriptions in *Death of a Salesman.* Again we quote only the beginning of one:

> Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry glow of orange.

If we read older drama, we find that playwrights do *not* give us much help, but by paying attention to the words we can to some degree visualize the locale. For instance, the first stage direction in *Hamlet* ("Enter Bernardo

and Francisco, two sentinels"), along with the opening dialogue ("Who's there?"; "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself"), indicates that we are in some sort of public place where anyone may suddenly appear. Elizabethan plays were staged in daylight, and there was no way of darkening the stage, so if the scene is a night scene the playwright has to convey this information. In this instance, the audience understands that the meeting takes place at night because the characters can hear but cannot see each other; to make certain, however, a few lines later Shakespeare has Bernardo say, "'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco."

5. *Pay attention to whatever* ***sound effects*** *are specified in the play.* In *Hamlet* (1.2.125), when the king (called "Denmark" in the speech we quote) drinks, he does so to the rather vulgar accompaniment of a cannonade:

> No jocund health that Denmark drinks today
> But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
> And the King's rouse the heaven shall bruit again,
> Respeaking earthly thunder.

The point is made again several times, but these salutes to King Claudius are finally displaced by a military salute to Hamlet; "a peal of ordnance is shot off," we are told, when his body is carried off the stage at the end of the play. Thus, the last sound that we hear in *Hamlet* is a validation of Hamlet as a hero.

In *Death of a Salesman,* before the curtain goes up, "A melody is heard, played upon a flute. It is small and fine, telling of grass and trees and the horizon." Then the curtain rises, revealing the Salesman's house, with "towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides." Obviously the sound of the flute is meant to tell us of the world that the Salesman is shut off from.

A sound effect, however, need not be so evidently symbolic to be important in a play. In Glaspell's *Trifles,* almost at the very end of the play we hear the "sound of a knob turning in the other room." The sound has an electrifying effect on the audience, as it does on the two women on the stage, and it precedes a decisive action.

6. *Pay attention to what the characters say, and keep in mind that (like real people)* ***dramatic characters are not always to be trusted.*** An obvious case is Shakespeare's Iago, an utterly unscrupulous villain who knows that he is a liar. But a character may be self-deceived, or, to put it a bit differently, characters may say what they honestly think but may not know what they are talking about.

Plot and Character

Although **plot** is sometimes equated with the gist of the narrative—the story—it is sometimes reserved to denote the writer's *arrangement* of the happenings in the story. Thus, all plays about the assassination of Julius Caesar have pretty much the same story, but by beginning with a scene of workmen enjoying a holiday (and thereby introducing the motif of the fickleness of the mob), Shakespeare's play has a plot different from a play that omits such a scene.

Handbooks on drama often suggest that a plot (the arrangement of happenings) should have a **rising action,** a **climax,** and a **falling action.** This sort of plot can be diagrammed as a pyramid, the tension rising through complications, or **crises,** to a climax, at which point the fate of the **protagonist** (chief character) is firmly established; the climax is the apex, and the tension allegedly slackens as we witness the **dénouement** (unknotting). Shakespeare sometimes used a pyramidal structure, placing his climax neatly in the middle of what seems to us to be the third of five acts.* Roughly the first half of *Julius Caesar* shows Brutus rising, reaching his height in 3.1 with the death of Caesar; but later in this scene he gives Marc Antony permission to speak at Caesar's funeral and thus he sets in motion his own fall, which occupies the second half of the play. In *Macbeth* (3.4.137–39), the protagonist attains his height in 3.1 ("Thou hast it now: King"), but he soon perceives that he is going downhill:

> I am in blood
> Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

Of course, no law demands such a structure, and a hunt for the pyramid usually causes the hunter to overlook all the crises but the middle one. William Butler Yeats once suggestively diagrammed a good plot not as a pyramid but as a line moving diagonally upward, punctuated by several crises. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that a good plot has its moments of tension, but the location of these will vary with the play. They are the product of **conflict,** but not all conflict produces tension; there is conflict but little tension in a ball game when the score is 10–0 in the ninth inning with two out and no one on base.

Regardless of how a plot is diagrammed, the **exposition** is that part that tells the audience what it has to know about the past, the **antecedent action.** When two gossiping servants tell each other that after a year away in Paris the young master is coming home tomorrow with a new wife, they are giving the audience the exposition by introducing characters and establishing relationships. The Elizabethans and the Greeks sometimes tossed out all pretense at dialogue and began with a **prologue,** like the one spoken by the Chorus at the outset of *Romeo and Juliet:*

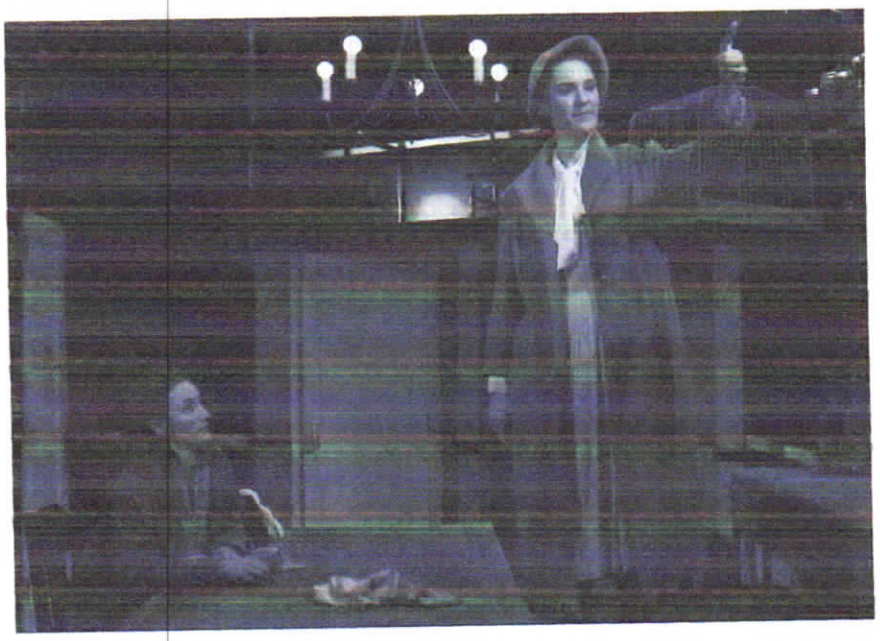
> Two households, both alike in dignity
> In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
> From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,

*An **act** is a main division in a drama or opera. Act divisions probably stem from Roman theory and derive ultimately from the Greek practice of separating episodes in a play by choral interludes; but Greek (and probably Roman) plays were performed without interruption, for the choral interludes were part of the plays themselves. Elizabethan plays, too, may have been performed without breaks; the division of Elizabethan plays into five acts is usually the work of editors rather than of authors. Frequently an act division today (commonly indicated by lowering the curtain and turning up the houselights) denotes change in locale and lapse of time. A **scene** is a smaller unit, either (1) a division with no change of locale or abrupt shift of time, or (2) a division consisting of an actor or group of actors on the stage; according to the second definition, the departure or entrance of an actor changes the composition of the group and thus introduces a new scene. (In an entirely different sense, the scene is the locale where a work is set.)

Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life. . . .

And in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom's first speech is a sort of prologue. However, the exposition also may extend far into the play so that the audience keeps getting bits of information that both clarify the present and build suspense about the future. Occasionally the **soliloquy** (a speech given by a character alone on the stage, revealing his or her thoughts) or the **aside** (speech given in the presence of others but unheard by them) is used to do the job of putting the audience in possession of the essential facts. The soliloquy and the aside are not limited to exposition; they are used to reveal the private thoughts of characters who, like people in real life, do not always tell others what their inner thoughts are. The soliloquy is especially used for meditation, where we might say the character is interacting not with another character but with himself or herself.

Because a play is not simply words but words spoken with accompanying gestures by performers who are usually costumed and in a particular setting, it may be argued that to read a play (rather than to see and hear it) is to falsify it. Drama is not literature, some people hold, but theater. However, there are replies: a play can be literature as well as theater, and readers of a play can perhaps enact in the theater of their mind a more effective play than the one put on by imperfect actors. After all, as Shakespeare's Duke Theseus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.205), says of actors, "The best in this kind are but shadows." In any case, we need not wait for actors to present a play; we can do much on our own.



A scene from The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf's 2010 production of *Trifles*, directed by Brooke O'Harra and performed by Mike Mikos, Caitlin McDonough-Thayer, Becca Blackwell, Daniel Manley, and Laryssa Husiak.