...D OF THE STORY

...Henry Fleming, the ...gets a second chance ...ing?

...ic meanings, are ...? Or does the film ...the film realistic or

...dialogue? In the ...Bridge," for in- ...the sound of sol- ...und of the hang- ...appropriate and ...imitate natural ...suggest states of ...and melodies— ...and pitch— ...lowing or cars

...and the literary ...ilm, or do you ...your experi- ...the film? Can ...ther cannot?

# 11

# WRITING ABOUT DRAMA

*Drama is based on the mistake. . . . all good drama has two movements, first the making of the mistake, then the discovery that it was a mistake.*

—W. H. Auden

*In a good play every speech should be as fully flavored as a nut or apple.*

—John Millington Synge

*The theater is supremely fitted to say, "Behold! These things are." Yet most dramatists employ it to say: "This moral truth can be learned from beholding this action."*

—Thornton Wilder

The essays you write about plays will be similar in many respects to analytic essays about fiction. Unless you are writing a review of a performance, you probably won't try to write about all aspects of a play. Rather, you'll choose some significant topic. For instance, if you are writing about Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), you might compare the aspirations of Jim O'Connor and Tom Wingfield, or you might compare Tom's illusions with those of his sister, Laura, and his mother, Amanda. Or you might examine the symbolism, perhaps limiting your essay to the glass animals or extending it to include other symbols, such as the fire escape, the lighting, and the Victrola. Similarly, if you are writing an analysis, you might decide to study the construction of one scene of a play, or, if the play does not have a great many scenes, even the construction of the entire play.

A list of questions on pages 211–212 may help you to find a topic for the particular play you choose.

## A SAMPLE ESSAY

The following essay discusses the structure of *The Glass Menagerie*. It mentions various characters, but, because its concern is with the arrangement of scenes, it does not examine any of the characters in detail. An essay might well be devoted to Williams's assertion that "There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at," but an essay on the structure of the play is probably not the place to talk about Williams's characterization of Amanda.

### Preliminary Notes

After deciding to write on the structure of the play, with an eye toward seeing the overall pattern, the student reread *The Glass Menagerie*, jotted down some notes briefly summarizing each of the seven scenes, with an occasional comment, and then typed them. On rereading the typed notes, he made a few deletions and he added a few observations in handwriting.

1. begins with Tom talking to audience;

~~says he is a magician~~

America, in 1930s

"shouting and confusion"

Father deserted

nagging Amanda nagging; ~~is she a bit cracked?~~

Tom: bored, angry

Laura: embarrassed, depressed

2. Laura: quit business school; sad, but

Jim's name is mentioned, so,

lighter tone introduced

3. Tom and Amanda argue ——— out and out battle

Tom almost destroys glass menagerie

Rage: Can things get any worse?



4. T and A reconciled ——— reconciliation, and false hopes- then final collapse

T to try to get a 'gentleman caller"

5. T tells A that Jim will visit

things are looking up

6. Jim arrives; L terrified

still, Aman thinks things can work out

7. Lights go out (foreshadowing dark ending?)

Jim a jerk, clumsy; breaks unicorn, but L doesn't seem to mind.

Maybe he is the right guy to draw her into normal world. Jim

reveals he is engaged:

"Desolation."

Tom escapes into merchant marine, but can't escape memories

Speaks to audience.

L. blows out candles (does this mean he forgets her? No,

because he is remembering her right now. I don't get it, if

the candles are supposed to be symbolic.)

These notes enabled the student to prepare a rough draft, which he then submitted to some classmates for peer review. (On peer review, see pages 42–44.)

Notice that the final version of the essay, printed below, is *not* merely a summary (a brief retelling of the plot). Although it does indeed include summary, it chiefly is devoted to showing *how* the scenes are related.

*Title is focused; it announces topic and thesis.*

*Opening paragraph closes in on thesis.*

The Solid Structure of The Glass Menagerie

In the "Production Notes" Tennessee Williams calls The Glass Menagerie a "memory play," a term that the narrator in the play also uses. Memories often consist of fragments of episodes which are so loosely connected that they seem chaotic, and therefore we

might think that The Glass Menagerie will consist of very loosely related episodes. However, the play covers only one episode, and though it gives the illusion of random talk, it really has a firm structure and moves steadily toward a foregone conclusion.

*Reasonable organization; the paragraph touches on the beginning and the end.*

Tennessee Williams divides the play into seven scenes. The first scene begins with a sort of prologue and the last scene concludes with a sort of epilogue that is related to the prologue. In the prologue Tom addresses the audience and comments on the 1930s as a time when America was "blind" and was a place of "shouting and confusion." Tom also mentions that our lives consist of expectations, and though he does not say that our expectations are unfulfilled, near the end of the prologue he quotes a postcard that his father wrote to the family he deserted: "Hello—Goodbye." In the epilogue Tom tells us that he followed his "father's footsteps," deserting the family. And just before the epilogue, near the end of Scene VII, we see what can be considered another desertion: Jim explains to Tom's sister Laura that he is engaged and therefore cannot visit Laura again. Thus the end is closely related to the beginning, and the play is the ready development of the initial implications.

*Brief but effective quotations.*

*Useful generalization based on earlier details*

*Chronological organization is reasonable. Opening topic sentence lets reader know where they are going.*

The first three scenes show things going from bad to worse. Amanda is a nagging mother who finds her only relief in talking about the past to her crippled



daughter, Laura, and her frustrated son, Tom. When she was young she was beautiful and was eagerly courted by rich young men, but now the family is poor and this harping on the past can only bore or infuriate Tom and embarrass or depress Laura, who have no happy past to look back to, who see no happy future, and who can only be upset by Amanda's insistence that they should behave as she behaved long ago. The second scene deepens the despair: Amanda learns that the timorous Laura has not been attending a business school but has retreated in terror from this confrontation with the contemporary world. Laura's helplessness is made clear to the audience, and so is Amanda's lack of understanding. Near the end of the second scene, however, Jim's name is introduced; he is a boy Laura had a crush on in high school, and so the audience gets a glimpse of a happier Laura and a sense that possibly Laura's world is wider than the stifling tenement in which she and her mother and brother live. But in the third scene things get worse, when Tom and Amanda have so violent an argument that they are no longer on speaking terms. Tom is so angry with his mother that he almost by accident destroys his sister's treasured collection of glass animals, the fragile lifeless world which is her refuge. The apartment is literally full of the "shouting and confusion" that Tom spoke of in his prologue.

*Brief plot summary supports thesis.*

*Useful summary and transition.*

The first three scenes have revealed a progressive worsening of relations; the next three scenes reveal a progressive improvement in relations. In Scene IV Tom and his mother are reconciled, and Tom reluctantly—apparently in an effort to make up with his mother—agrees to try to get a friend to come to dinner so that Laura will have "a gentleman caller." In Scene V Tom tells his mother that Jim will come to dinner on the next night, and Amanda brightens, because she sees a possibility of security for Laura at last. In Scene VI Jim arrives, and despite Laura's initial terror, there seems, at least in Amanda's mind, to be the possibility that things will go well.

The seventh scene, by far the longest, at first seems to be fulfilling Amanda's hopes. Despite the ominous fact that the lights go out because Tom has not paid the electric bill, Jim is at ease. He is an insensitive oaf, but that doesn't seem to bother Amanda, and almost miraculously he manages to draw Laura somewhat out of her sheltered world. Even when Jim in his clumsiness breaks the horn of Laura's treasured glass unicorn, she is not upset. In fact, she is almost relieved because the loss of the horn makes the animal less "freakish" and he "will feel more at home with the other horses." In a way, of course, the unicorn symbolizes the crippled Laura, who at least for the moment feels less freakish and isolated now that she is somewhat reunited with society through Jim. But this is a play about life in a blind and confused world, and though in a previous age the father escaped, there can be no escape now. Jim reveals that he is engaged, Laura relapses into "desolation," Amanda relapses into rage and bitterness, and Tom relapses into dreams of escape.



*The essayist is thinking and commenting, not merely summarizing the plot.*

In a limited sense Tom does escape. He leaves the family and joins the merchant marine, but his last speech or epilogue tells us that he cannot escape the memory of his sister: "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" And so the end of the last scene brings us back again to the beginning of the first scene: We are still in a world of "the blind" and of "confusion." But now at the end of the play the darkness is deeper; the characters are lost forever in their unhappiness as Laura "blows the candles out," the darkness being literal but also symbolic of their extinguished hopes.

*Useful, thoughtful summary of the ms.*

Numerous devices, such as repeated references to the absent father, to Amanda's youth, to Laura's Victrola, and of course to Laura's glass menagerie help to tie the scenes together into a unified play. But beneath these threads of imagery, and recurring motifs, is a fundamental pattern that involves the movement from nagging (Scenes I and II) to open hostilities (Scene III)

to temporary reconciliation (Scene IV) to false hopes (Scenes V and VI) to an impossible heightening of false hopes and then, in a swift descent, to an inevitable collapse (Scene VII). Tennessee Williams has constructed his play carefully. G. B. Tennyson says that a "playwright must 'build' his speeches, as the theatrical expression has it" (13). But a playwright must do more, he must also build his play out of scenes. Like Ibsen, if Williams had been introduced to an architect he might have said, "Architecture is my business too."

[New page]

Works Cited

Tennyson, G. B. An Introduction to Drama. New York: Holt, 1967.

Williams, Tennessee. The Glass Menagerie. Literature: Thinking, Reading, and Writing Critically. 2nd ed. Ed. Sylvan Barnet et al. New York: Longman, 1997. 1563–1588.

The danger in writing about structure, especially if one proceeds by beginning at the beginning and moving steadily to the end, is that one will simply repeat the plot. This essay on *The Glass Menagerie* manages to say things about the organization of the plot even as it tells the plot. It has a point, hinted at in the pleasantly paradoxical title, developed in the body of the essay, and wrapped up in the last line.

## TYPES OF PLAYS

Most of the world's great plays written before the twentieth century may be regarded as one of two kinds: **tragedy** or **comedy.** Roughly speaking, tragedy dramatizes the conflict between the vitality of the individual life and the laws or limits of life. The tragic hero reaches a height, going beyond the experience of others but at the cost of his or her life. Comedy dramatizes the vitality of the laws of social life. In comedy, the good life is seen to reside in the shedding of an individualism that isolates, in favor of a union with a genial and enlightened society. These points must be amplified a bit before we go on to the point that any important play does much more than can be put into such simple formulas.



### Tragedy

Tragic heroes usually go beyond the standards to which reasonable people adhere; they do some fearful deed that ultimately destroys them. This deed is often said to be an act of **hubris,** a Greek word meaning something like "overweening pride." It may involve, for instance, violating a taboo, such as that against taking life. But if the hubristic act ultimately destroys the man or woman who performs it, it also shows that person to be in some way more fully a living being—a person who has experienced life more fully, whether by heroic action or by capacity for enduring suffering—than the other characters in the play. Othello kills Desdemona, Lear gives away his crown and banishes his one loving daughter, Antony loses his share of the Roman Empire, but all of these men seem to live more fully than the other characters in the plays—for one thing, they experience a kind of anguish unknown to those who surround them and who outlive them. (If the hero does not die, he or she usually is left in some deathlike state, as is the blind Oedipus in *King Oedipus.*)

In tragedy, we see humanity pushed to an extreme; in agony and grief the hero enters a world unknown to most and reveals magnificence. After his or her departure from the stage, we are left in a world of littler people. The closing lines of almost any of Shakespeare's tragedies may be used to illustrate the point. *King Lear,* for example, ends thus:

> The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

If you are writing about a tragedy, you might consider whether the points just made are illustrated in your play. Is the hero guilty of hubris? Does the hero seem a greater person than the others in the play? An essay examining such questions probably requires not only a character sketch but also some comparison with other characters.

Tragedy commonly involves **irony** of two sorts: unconsciously ironic deeds and unconsciously ironic speeches. **Ironic deeds** have consequences more or less the reverse of what the doer intends. Macbeth thinks that by killing Duncan he will gain happiness, but he finds that his deed brings him sleepless nights. Brutus thinks that by killing Caesar he will bring liberty to Rome, but he brings tyranny. In an **unconsciously ironic speech,** the speaker's words mean one thing to him or her but something more significant to the audience, as when King Duncan, baffled by Cawdor's treason, says:

> There's no art
> To find the mind's construction in the face:
> He was a gentleman on whom I built
> An absolute trust.

At this moment Macbeth, whom we have already heard meditating the murder of Duncan, enters. Duncan's words are true, but he does not apply them to Macbeth, as the audience does. A few moments later Duncan praises Macbeth as "a peerless kinsman." Soon Macbeth will indeed become peerless, when he kills Duncan and ascends to the throne.[1] Sophocles' use of ironic deeds and speeches is so pervasive, especially in *King Oedipus,* that **Sophoclean irony** has become a critical term. Here is a critic summarizing the ironies of *King Oedipus:*

> As the images unfold, the enquirer turns into the object of enquiry, the hunter into the prey, the doctor into the patient, the investigator into the criminal, the revealer into the thing revealed, the finder into the thing found, the savior into the thing saved ("I was saved, for some dreadful destiny"), the liberator into the thing released ("I released your feet from the bonds which pierced your ankles" says the Corinthian messenger), the accuser becomes the defendant, the ruler the subject, the teacher not only the pupil but also the object lesson, the example.
>
> —BERNARD KNOX, "Sophocles' Oedipus," in *Tragic Themes in Western Literature,* ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven, 1955), 10–11

Notice, by the way, the neatness of that sentence: it is long, but it does not ramble, it does not baffle, and it does not suggest a stuffy writer. The

[1] *Dramatic irony* (ironic deeds or happenings, and unconsciously ironic speeches) must be distinguished from *verbal irony,* which is produced when the speaker is *conscious* that his or her words mean something different from what they say.



verb *turns* governs the first two-thirds, and after the second long parenthetical statement, when the messenger's speech may cause the reader to forget the verb, the writer provides another verb, *becomes.*

When the deed backfires or has a reverse effect, as happens with Macbeth's effort to gain happiness, we have what Aristotle called a **peripeteia,** or a **reversal.** When a character comes to perceive what has happened (Macbeth's "I have lived long enough: my way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf"), he experiences (in Aristotle's language) an **anagnorisis,** or **recognition.** Strictly speaking, for Aristotle the recognition was a matter of literal identification, for example, that Oedipus is the son of a man he killed. In *Macbeth,* the recognition in this sense is that Macduff, "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped," is the man who fits the prophecy that Macbeth can be conquered only by someone not "of woman born."

In his analysis of drama Aristotle says that the tragic hero comes to grief through his **hamartia,** a term sometimes translated as **tragic flaw** but perhaps better translated as **tragic error.** Thus, it is a great error for Othello to trust Iago and to strangle Desdemona, for Lear to give away his kingdom, and for Macbeth to decide to help fulfill the prophecies. If we hold to the translation *flaw,* we begin to hunt for a fault in their characters, and we say, for instance, that Othello is gullible, Lear self-indulgent, Macbeth ambitious, or some such thing. In doing this, we may overlook their grandeur. Take a single example: Iago boasts he can dupe Othello because

> The Moor is of a free and open nature
> That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.

We ought to hesitate before we say that a man who trusts men because they seem to be honest has a flaw.

**Writing about Tragedy** When writing about tragedy, the most common essay topic is on the tragic hero. Too often, however, the hero is judged mechanically: He or she must be noble, must have a flaw, must do a fearful deed, must recognize the flaw, must die. The previous paragraph suggests that Shakespeare's practice makes doubtful one of these matters, the flaw. Be similarly cautious about accepting the rest of the package unexamined. (This book has several times urged you to trust your feelings; don't assume that what you have been taught about tragedy—in these pages or elsewhere—must be true and that you should, therefore, trust such assertions even if they go against your own responses to a given play.) On the other hand, if *tragedy* is to have any meaning—any use as a term—it must have some agreed-upon attributes.

An essay that seeks to determine whether a character is a tragic character ought at its outset to make clear its conception of tragedy and the degree of rigidity, or flexibility, with which it will interpret some or all of its categories. For example, it may indicate that although nobility is essential, nobility is not equivalent to high rank. A middle-class figure with certain mental or spiritual characteristics may, in such a view, be an acceptable tragic hero.

An essay closely related to the sort we have been talking about measures a character by some well-known theory of tragedy. For example, one can measure Willy Loman, in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), against Arthur Miller's essays on tragedy or against Aristotle's remarks on tragedy. The organization of such an essay is usually not a problem: Isolate the relevant aspects of the theoretical statement, and then examine the character to see if, point by point, he illustrates them. But remember that even if Willy Loman fulfills Arthur Miller's idea of a tragic figure, you need not accept him as tragic; conversely, if he does not fulfill Aristotle's idea, you need not deny him tragic status. Aristotle may be wrong.

### ✔ A Checklist: Writing about Tragedy

- ❑ What causes the tragedy? Is it a flaw in the central character? a mistake (*not* the same thing as a flaw) made by this character? an outside force, such as another character or fate?
- ❑ Is the tragic character defined partly by other characters, for instance, by characters who help us to sense what the character *might* have done, or who in some other way reveal the strengths or weaknesses of the protagonist?
- ❑ Does a viewer know more than the tragic figure knows? more than most or all of the characters know?
- ❑ Does the tragic character achieve any sort of wisdom at the end of the play?
- ❑ To what degree do you sympathize with the tragic character?
- ❑ Is the play depressing? If not, why not?

## Comedy

Although a **comedy** ought to be amusing, the plays that are called comedies are not just collections of jokes. Rather, they are works that are entertaining throughout and that end happily.

In comedy, the fullest life is seen to reside within enlightened social norms: At the beginning of a comedy we find banished dukes, unhappy lovers, crabby parents, jealous husbands, and harsh laws, but at the end we usually have a unified and genial society, often symbolized by a marriage



feast to which everyone, or almost everyone, is invited. Early in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, we meet quarreling young lovers and a father who demands that his daughter either marry a man she does not love or enter a convent. Such is the Athenian law. At the end of the play the lovers are properly matched, to everyone's satisfaction.

Speaking broadly, most comedies fall into one of two classes: **satiric comedy** and **romantic comedy.** In satiric comedy the emphasis is on the obstructionists—the irate fathers, hardheaded businessmen, and other members of the Establishment who at the beginning of the play seem to hold all the cards, preventing joy from reigning. They are held up to ridicule because they are repressive monomaniacs enslaved to themselves, acting mechanistically (always irate, always hardheaded) instead of responding genially to the ups and downs of life. The outwitting of these obstructionists, usually by the younger generation, often provides the resolution of the plot. Ben Jonson (1572–1637), Molière (1627–73), and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) are in this tradition; their comedy, according to an ancient Roman formula, "chastens morals with ridicule"; that is, it reforms folly or vice by laughing at it. In romantic comedy (one thinks of *A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It,* and *Twelfth Night*), the emphasis is on a pair or pairs of delightful people who engage our sympathies as they run their obstacle race to the altar. Obstructionists are found here, too, but the emphasis is on festivity.

**Writing about Comedy** Essays on comedy often examine the nature of the humor. Why is an irate father, in this context, funny? Or why is a young lover, again in this context, funny? Commonly, one will find that at least some of the humor is in the disproportionate nature of their activities (they get terribly excited) and in their inflexibility. In both of these qualities they are rather like the cat in animated cartoons who repeatedly chases the mouse to his hole and who repeatedly bangs his head against the wall. The following is a skeleton of a possible essay on why Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is amusing:

> Jaques is insistently melancholy. In the Eden-like Forest of Arden, he sees only the dark side of things.
>
> His monomania, however, is harmless to himself and to others; because it causes us no pain, it may entertain us.
>
> Indeed, we begin to look forward to his melancholy speeches. We delight in hearing him fulfill our expectations by wittily finding gloom where others find mirth.

> We are delighted, too, to learn that this chastiser of others has in fact been guilty of the sort of behavior he chastises.
>
> At the end of the play, when four couples are wed, the inflexible Jaques insists on standing apart from the general rejoicing.

Such might be the gist of an essay. It needs to be supported with details, and it can be enriched, for example, by a comparison between Jaques's sort of jesting and Touchstone's, but it is at least a promising draft of an outline.

In writing about comedy you may be concerned with the function of one scene or character, but whatever your topic, you may find it helpful to begin by trying to decide whether the play is primarily romantic or primarily satiric (or something else). One way of getting at this is to ask yourself to what degree you sympathize with the characters. Do you laugh *with* them, sympathetically, or do you laugh *at* them, regarding them as at least somewhat contemptible?

### ✔ A Checklist: Writing about Comedy

- ❑ Do the comic complications arise chiefly out of the personalities of the characters (for instance, pretentiousness or amorousness) or out of the situations (for instance, mistaken identity)?
- ❑ What are the chief goals of the figures? Do we sympathize with these goals, or do we laugh at persons who pursue them? If we laugh, *why* do we laugh?
- ❑ What are the personalities of those who oppose the central characters? Do we laugh at them, or do we sympathize with them?
- ❑ What is funny about the play? Is the comedy high (including verbal comedy) or chiefly situational and physical?
- ❑ Is the play predominantly genial, or is there a strong satiric tone?
- ❑ Does the comedy have any potentially tragic elements in it? Might the plot be slightly rewritten so that it would become a tragedy?
- ❑ What, if anything, do the characters learn by the end of the play?

## ASPECTS OF DRAMA

### Theme

If we have perceived the work properly, we ought to be able to formulate its **theme,** its underlying idea, and perhaps we can even go so far as to say its moral attitudes, its view of life, its wisdom. Some critics, it is true, have



argued that the concept of theme is meaningless. They hold that *Macbeth,* for example, gives us only an extremely detailed history of one imaginary man. In this view, *Macbeth* says nothing to you or me; it says only what happened to some imaginary man. Even *Julius Caesar* says nothing about the historical Julius Caesar or about the nature of Roman politics. On this we can agree; no one would offer Shakespeare's play as evidence of what the historical Caesar said or did. But surely the view that the concept of theme is meaningless and that a work tells us only about imaginary creatures is a desperate one. We *can* say that we see in *Julius Caesar* the fall of power or (if we are thinking of Brutus) the vulnerability of idealism.

To the reply that these are mere truisms, we can counter: Yes, but the truisms are presented in such a way that they take on life and become a part of us rather than remain things of which we say, "I've heard it said, and I guess it's so."

A brief illustration may be helpful here. A critic examining Ibsen's achievements begins by trying to see what some of the plays are in fact about.

> We must not waste more than a paragraph on such fiddle-faddle as the notion that *Ghosts* is a play about venereal disease or that *A Doll's House* is a play about women's rights. On these terms, *King Lear* is a play about housing for the elderly and *Hamlet* is a stage-debate over the reality of spooks. Venereal disease and its consequences are represented onstage in *Ghosts;* so, to all intents and purposes, is incest; but the theme of the play is inherited guilt, and the sexual pathology of the Alving family is an engine in the hands of that theme. *A Doll's House* represents a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person, but it proposes nothing categorical about women becoming people; in fact, its real theme has nothing to do with the sexes. It is the irrepressible conflict of two different personalities which have founded themselves on two radically different estimates of reality.
>
> —ROBERT M. ADAMS, "Ibsen on the Contrary," in *Modern Drama,* ed. Anthony Caputi (New York, 1966), 345

Such a formulation can be most useful; a grasp of the theme helps us to see what the plot is really all about, what the plot suggests in its universal meaning or applicability.

Some critics (influenced by Aristotle's statement that a drama is an imitation of an action) use **action** in a sense equivalent to *theme.* In this sense, the action is the underlying happening—the inner happening—for example, "the enlightenment of someone" or "the coming of

unhappiness" or "the finding of the self by self-surrender." One might say that the theme of *Macbeth* is embodied in some words that Macbeth himself utters: "Blood will have blood." This is not to say that these words and no other words embody the theme or the action. Francis Fergusson suggests that another expression in *Macbeth*, to the effect that Macbeth "outran the pauser, reason," describes the action of the play:

> To "outrun" reason suggests an impossible stunt, like lifting oneself by one's own bootstraps. It also suggests a competition or race, like those of nightmare, which cannot be won. As for the word "reason," Shakespeare associates it with nature and nature's order, in the individual soul, in society, and in the cosmos. To outrun reason is thus to violate nature itself, to lose the bearings of common sense and of custom, and to move into a spiritual realm bounded by the irrational darkness of Hell one way, and the superrational grace of faith the other way. As the play develops before us, all the modes of this absurd, or evil, or supernatural, action are attempted, the last being Malcolm's and Macduff's acts of faith.
>
> —*The Human Image in Dramatic Literature* (New York, 1957), 118

Critics like Fergusson, who are influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics*, assume that the dramatist conceives of an action and then imitates it or sets it forth by means of first a plot and characters and then by means of language, gesture, and perhaps spectacle and music. When the Greek comic dramatist Menander (342–292 BCE) told a friend he had finished his play and now had only to write it, he must have meant that he had the action or the theme firmly in mind and had worked out the plot and the requisite characters. All that remained was to set down the words.

## Plot

**Plot** is variously defined, sometimes as equivalent to *story* (in this sense a synopsis of *Julius Caesar* has the same plot as *Julius Caesar*) but more often, and more usefully, as the dramatist's particular *arrangement* of the story. Because Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* begins with a scene dramatizing an encounter between plebeians and tribunes, its plot is different from that of a play on Julius Caesar in which such a scene (not necessary to the story) is omitted. Richard G. Moulton, discussing the early part of Shakespeare's plot in *Julius Caesar*, examines the relationship between the first two scenes.



> The opening scene strikes appropriately the key-note of the whole action. In it we see the tribunes of the people—officers whose whole *raison d'être* is to be the mouthpiece of the commonalty—restraining their own clients from the noisy honors they are disposed to pay Caesar. To the justification in our eyes of a conspiracy against Caesar, there could not be a better starting-point than this hint that the popular worship of Caesar, which has made him what he is, is itself reaching its reaction-point. Such a suggestion moreover makes the whole play one complete *wave* of popular fickleness from crest to crest.
>
> The second is the scene upon which the dramatist mainly relies for the *crescendo* in the justification of the conspirators. It is a long scene, elaborately contrived so as to keep the conspirators and their cause before us at their very best, and the victim at his very worst.
>
> —*Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (Oxford, 1893), 188–189

Moulton's discussion of the plot continues at length. One may argue that he presents too favorable a view of the conspirators (when he says we see the conspirators at their best, he seems to overlook their fawning), but that is not our concern here; here we have been talking about the process of examining juxtaposed scenes, a process Moulton's words illustrate well.

Handbooks on the drama often suggest that a plot (arrangement of happenings) should have a **rising action**, a **climax**, and a **falling action.** Such a plot may be diagrammed as a pyramid: The tension rises through complications or **crises** to a climax, at which point 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 *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, shows Romeo winning Juliet, but when in 3.1 he kills her cousin Tybalt, Romeo sets in motion (it is often said) the second half of the play, the losing of Juliet and of his own life. Similarly, in *Julius Caesar* Brutus rises in the first half of the play, reaching his height in 3.1 with the death of Caesar, but later in this scene he gives Mark 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*, 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.

In *Hamlet*, the protagonist proves to his own satisfaction Claudius's guilt in 3.2, by the play within the play, but almost immediately he begins to worsen his position by failing to kill Claudius when he is an easy target (3.3) and by contaminating himself with the murder of Polonius (3.4).

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. The Irish playwright William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) once suggestively diagrammed a good plot not as a pyramid but as a line moving diagonally upward, punctuated by several crises. And it has been said that in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), "nothing happens twice." Perhaps it is sufficient to say that a good plot has its moments of tension, but that the location of these will vary with the play. They are the product of **conflict**, but it should be noted that not all conflict produces tension; there is conflict but little tension in a ball game when the home team is ahead 10–0 in the ninth inning.

Regardless of how a plot is diagrammed, the **exposition** is the part that tells the audience what it has to know about the past, the **antecedent action**. Two gossiping servants who tell each other that after a year away in Paris the young master is coming home tomorrow with a new wife are giving the audience the exposition. The exposition in Shakespeare's *Tempest* is almost ruthlessly direct: Prospero tells his naive daughter, "I should inform thee farther," and for about 150 lines he proceeds to tell her why she is on an almost uninhabited island. Prospero's harangue is punctuated by his daughter's professions of attention, but 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 opening 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,
> 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. . . .

But the exposition may also extend far into the play, being given in small, explosive revelations.

Exposition has been discussed as though it consists simply of informing the audience about events, but exposition can do much more. It can give us an understanding of the characters who themselves are talking about other characters, it can evoke a mood, and it can generate tension. When we summarize the opening act and treat it as "mere exposition," we are probably losing what is in fact dramatic in it. Moulton, in his analysis of the first two scenes in *Julius Caesar*, does not make the mistake of thinking that the first scenes exist merely to tell the audience certain facts.



In fact, exposition usually includes **foreshadowing.** Details given in the exposition, which we may at first take as mere background, often turn out to be highly relevant to later developments. For instance, in the short first scene of *Macbeth*, the Witches introduce the name of Macbeth, but in such words as "fair is foul" and "when the battle's lost and won" they also give glimpses of what will happen: Macbeth will become foul, and although he will seem to win (he becomes king), he will lose the most important battle. Similarly, during the exposition in the second scene we learn that Macbeth has loyally defeated Cawdor, who betrayed King Duncan, and Macbeth has been given Cawdor's title. Later we will find that, like Cawdor, Macbeth betrays Duncan: In giving us the background about Cawdor, the exposition is also telling us (though we don't know it when we first see or read the play) something about what will happen to Macbeth.

### A Checklist: Writing about Plot

In writing about an aspect of plot, you may consider one of the following topics:

- ☐ Is the plot improbable? If so, is the play, therefore, weak?
- ☐ Does a scene that might at first glance seem unimportant or even irrelevant serve an important function?
- ☐ If certain actions that could be shown onstage take place offstage, what is the reason? In *Macbeth*, why do you suppose the murder of Duncan takes place offstage, whereas Banquo and Macduff's family are murdered onstage? Why, then, might Shakespeare have preferred not to show us the murder of Duncan? What has he gained? (A good way to approach this sort of question is to think of what your own reaction would be if the action were shown onstage.)
- ☐ If the play has several conflicts—for example, between pairs of lovers or between parents and their children and also between the parents themselves—how are these conflicts related? Are they parallel? Or contrasting?

- ❑ Does the arrangement of scenes have a structure? For instance, do the scenes depict a rise and then a fall?
- ❑ Does the plot seem satisfactorily concluded? Any loose threads? If so, is the apparent lack of a complete resolution a weakness in the play?

An analysis of plot, then, will consider the arrangement of the episodes and the effect of juxtapositions, as well as the overall story. A useful essay could be written on the function of one scene. Such an essay may point out, for example, that the long, comparatively slow scene (4.3) in *Macbeth*, in which Malcolm, Macduff, an English doctor, and Ross converse near the palace of the king of England, is not so much a leisurely digression as may at first be thought. After reading it closely, you may decide that it has several functions. For example, it serves to indicate the following:

1. The forces that will eventually overthrow Macbeth are gathering.
2. Even good men must tell lies during Macbeth's reign.
3. Macbeth has the vile qualities that the virtuous Malcolm pretends to have.
4. Macbeth has failed—as the king of England has not—to be a source of health to the realm.

It doubtless will take an effort to come to these or other conclusions, but once you have come to such ideas (probably by means of brainstorming and listing; see pages 26–30), the construction of an essay on the function of a scene is fairly simple: An introductory paragraph announces the general topic and thesis—an apparently unnecessary scene will be shown to be functional—and the rest of the essay demonstrates the functions, usually in climactic order if some of the functions are more important than others.

How might you organize such an essay? If you think all of the functions are equally important, perhaps you will organize the material from the most to the least obvious, thereby keeping the reader's attention to the end. If, on the other hand, you believe that although justifications for the scene can be imagined, the scene is nevertheless unsuccessful, say so. announce your view early, consider the alleged functions one by one, and explain your reasons for finding them unconvincing as you take up each point.

Sometimes an analysis of the plot will examine the relationships between the several stories in a play: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has supernatural lovers, mature royal lovers, young Athenian lovers, a bumpkin



who briefly becomes the lover of the fairy queen, and a play (put on by the bumpkins) about legendary lovers. How these are held together and how they define each other and the total play are matters that concern anyone looking at the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## Characterization and Motivation

**Characterization,** or personality, is defined most obviously, as in fiction (see pages 140–141), by what the characters do (a stage direction tells us that "Hedda paces up and down, clenching her fists"), by what they say (she asks her husband to draw the curtains), by what others say about them, and by the setting in which they move.

The characters are also defined in part by other characters whom they in some degree resemble. Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras have each lost their fathers, but Hamlet spares the praying King Claudius, whereas Laertes, seeking vengeance on Hamlet for murdering Laertes' father, says he would cut Hamlet's throat in church; Hamlet meditates about the nature of action, but Fortinbras leads the Norwegians in a military campaign and ultimately acquires Denmark. Here is Kenneth Muir commenting briefly on the way Laertes helps us see Hamlet more precisely. Notice how Muir first offers a generalization, then supports it with details, and finally, drawing a conclusion from the details he has just presented, offers an even more important generalization that effectively closes his paragraph.

> In spite of Hamlet's description of him as "a very noble youth," there is a coarseness of fibre in Laertes which is revealed throughout the play. He has the stock responses of a man of his time and position. He gives his sister copybook advice; he goes to Paris (we are bound to suspect) to tread the primrose path; and after his father's death and again at his sister's grave he shows by the ostentation and "bravery of his grief" that he pretends more than he really feels. He has no difficulty in raising a successful rebellion against Claudius, which suggests that the more popular prince could have done the same. Laertes, indeed, acts more or less in the way that many critics profess to think Hamlet ought to act; and his function in the play is to show precisely the opposite. Although Hamlet himself may envy Laertes' capacity for ruthless action we ought surely to prefer Hamlet's craven scruples.
>
> —*Shakespeare: The Great Tragedies* (London, 1961), 12–13

Muir has not exhausted the topic in this paragraph. If you are familiar with *Hamlet* you may want to think about writing an entire essay comparing Hamlet with Laertes.

Other plays provide examples of such **foils**, or characters who set one another off. Macbeth and Banquo both hear prophecies, but they act and react differently; Brutus is one kind of assassin, Cassius another, and Casca still another. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps Didi and Gogo are contrasted with Pozzo and his slave, Lucky, the former two suggesting the contemplative life, the latter two the practical or active (and, it turns out, mistaken) life.

Any analysis of a character, then, will have to take into account, in some degree, the other characters that help show what he or she is, that help set forth his or her motivation (grounds for action, inner drives, goals).

## Conventions

Artists and their audience have some tacit—even unconscious—agreements. When we watch a motion picture and see an image dissolve and then reappear, we understand that some time has passed. Such a device, unrealistic but widely accepted, is a **convention.** In the theater, we sometimes see on the stage a room, realistic in all details except that it lacks a fourth wall; were that wall in place, we would see it and not the interior of the room. We do not regret the missing wall, and, indeed, we are scarcely aware that we have entered into an agreement to pretend that this strange room is an ordinary room with the usual number of walls. Sometimes the characters in a play speak verse, although outside the theater no human beings speak verse for more than a few moments. Again we accept the device because it allows the author to make a play, and we want a play. In *Hamlet* the characters are understood to be speaking Danish, in *Julius Caesar* Latin, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Greek, yet they all speak English for our benefit.

Two other conventions are especially common in older drama: the **soliloquy** and the **aside.** In the former, although a solitary character speaks his or her thoughts aloud, we do not judge him or her to be a lunatic; in the latter, a character speaks in the presence of others but is understood not to be heard by them, or to be heard only by those to whom he or she directs those words.

The soliloquy and the aside strike us as artificial—and they are. But they so strike us only because they are no longer customary. Because we are accustomed to it, we are not bothered by the artificiality of music accompanying dialogue in a motion picture. The conventions of the modern theater are equally artificial but are so customary that we do not notice them. The Elizabethans, who saw a play acted without a break, would probably find strange our assumption that, when we return to the auditorium after a ten-minute intermission, the ensuing action may be supposed to follow immediately the action before the intermission.



## Costumes, Gestures, and Settings

The language of a play, broadly conceived, includes the costumes that the characters wear, the gestures that the characters make, and the settings in which the characters move. As Ezra Pound says, "The medium of drama is not words, but persons moving about on a stage using words."

Let's begin with **costume,** specifically with Nora Helmer's changes of costume in Ibsen's *A Doll's House.* 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 is supposed to be appropriate to the Italian dance, but surely its multitude of colors also expresses 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 dishevelled hair, then, *speak* 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 her husband, Torvald, 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 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 never really has 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 signifies the death of her old way of life; Nora is now aware that life is not child's play.

Ibsen did not invent the use of costumes as dramatic language; it goes back to the beginnings of drama, and one has only to think of

*Character*

- ❑ What are the traits of the chosen character?
- ❑ A dramatic character is not likely to be thoroughly realistic, a copy of someone we might know. Still, we can ask if the character is consistent and coherent. We can also ask if the character is complex or is, on the other hand, a rather simple representative of some human type.
- ❑ How is the character defined? Consider what the character says and does and what others say about him or her and do to him or her. Also consider other characters who more or less resemble the character in question, because the similarities—and the differences—may be significant.
- ❑ How trustworthy are the characters when they characterize themselves? When they characterize others?
- ❑ Do characters change as the play goes on, or do we simply know them better at the end? If characters change, *why* do they change?
- ❑ What do you make of the minor characters? Are they merely necessary to the plot, or are they foils to other characters? Or do they serve some other functions?
- ❑ If a character is tragic, does the tragedy seem to proceed from a moral flaw, from an intellectual error, from the malice of others, from sheer chance, or from some combination of these?
- ❑ What are the character's goals? To what degree do you sympathize with them? If a character is comic, do you laugh *with* or *at* the character?
- ❑ Do you think the characters are adequately motivated?
- ❑ Is a given character so meditative that you feel he or she is engaged less in a dialogue with others than in a dialogue with the self? If so, do you feel that this character is in large degree a spokesperson for the author, commenting not only on the world of the play but also on the outside world?

*Nonverbal Language*

- ❑ If the playwright does not provide full stage directions, try to imagine for a least one scene what gestures and tones might accompany each speech. (The first scene is often a good one to try your hand at.)
- ❑ What do you make of the setting? Does it help reveal character? Do changes of scene strike you as symbolic? If so, symbolic of what?



## ✔ A Checklist: Getting Ideas for Writing about a Film Based on a Play

*Preliminaries*

- ❑ Is the title of the film the same as the title of the play? If not, what is implied?

*Dramatic Adaptations*

- ❑ Does the film closely follow its original and neglect the potentialities of the camera? Or does it so revel in cinematic devices that it distorts the original?
- ❑ Does the film do violence to the theme of the original? Is the film better than its source? Are the additions or omissions due to the medium or to a crude or faulty interpretation of the original?

*Plot and Character*

- ❑ Can film deal as effectively with inner action—mental processes—as with external, physical action? In a given film, how is the inner action conveyed? Olivier used voice-over for sections of Hamlet's soliloquies—that is, we hear Hamlet's voice but his lips do not move.
- ❑ Are shots and sequences adequately developed, or do they seem jerky? (A shot may be jerky by being extremely brief or at an odd angle; a sequence may be jerky by using discontinuous images or fast cuts. Sometimes, of course, jerkiness may be desirable.) If such cinematic techniques as wipes, dissolves, and slow motion are used, are they meaningful and effective?
- ❑ Are the characters believable?
- ❑ Are the actors appropriately cast?

*Soundtrack*

- ❑ Does the soundtrack offer more than realistic dialogue? Is the music appropriate and functional? (Music may, among other things, imitate natural sounds, give a sense of locale or of ethnic group, suggest states of mind, provide ironic commentary, or—by repeated melodies—help establish connections.) Are volume, tempo, and pitch—whether of music or of such sounds as the wind blowing or cars moving—used to stimulate emotions?

*Emily Dickinson (1830–86)*

WILD NIGHTS—WILD NIGHTS

Wild Nights—Wild Nights,
Were I with Thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile—the Winds
To a Heart in port—
Done with the Compass—
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden
—Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor—Tonight—
In Thee.

**Questions to Stimulate Ideas about "Wild Nights—Wild Nights"** This chapter will end with a checklist of many questions that you may ask yourself to get ideas for writing about any poem. Here, however, are a few questions about this particular poem, to help you to think about it:

1. How does this poem communicate the speaker's state of mind? For example, in the first stanza (lines 1–4), what—beyond the meaning of the words—is communicated by the repetition of "Wild Nights"? In the last stanza (lines 9–12), what is the tone of "Ah, the Sea!"? (*Tone* means something like "emotional coloring," as when one speaks of a "businesslike tone," a "bitter tone," or an "eager tone.")
2. Paraphrase (put into your own words) the second stanza. What does this stanza communicate about the speaker's love for the beloved? Compare your paraphrase and the original. What does the form of the original sentences (the *omission,* for instance, of the verbs of lines 5 and 6 and of the subject in lines 7 and 8) communicate?
3. Paraphrase the last stanza. How does "Ah, the Sea!" fit into your paraphrase? If you had trouble fitting it in, do you think the poem would be better off without it? If not, why not?

Although the voice speaking a poem often clearly is *not* the author's, in many other poems the voice does have the ring of the author's own voice,