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DISCOVERING GENRE:

Drama

Written by

BILL MCMAHON

Edited by

DOUGLAS E. GRUDZINA



Prestwick House

P.O. BOX 658 CLAYTON, DELAWARE 19938

DISCOVERING GENRE:

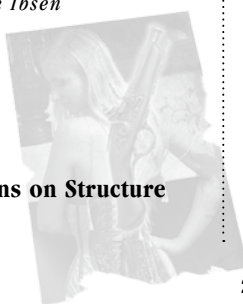
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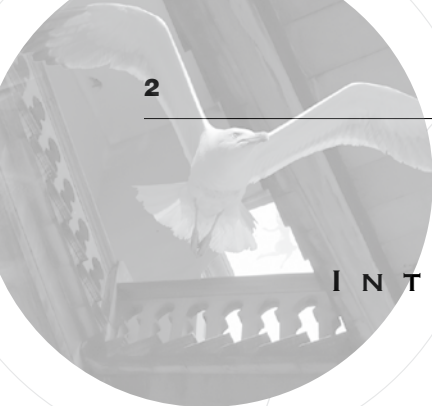
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I N T R O D U C T I O N



DRAMA IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST FORMS OF LITERATURE. It dates back at least as far as ancient Egypt; the earliest recorded plays date as far back as the fifth century. In medieval Europe, drama took the form of liturgical performances. In time, theatre evolved into forms as varied as revenge tragedies, historical pageants, Restoration comedies, Victorian melodramas, Naturalism, Absurdism, opera, musicals—and more.

Like all fiction, drama shares the basic elements of story—character, plot, conflict, theme, and metaphor—but it is separate in that it is written primarily to be performed, rather than read. Playwrights write for live audiences, and their tales must be told in a specific, and necessarily limited, time frame—usually two to three hours maximum for the modern audience, unless the work at hand is an epic and special event.

Scripts are, therefore, by definition more concentrated in form and technique than, for instance, novels. The playwright must employ an economy of means to communicate character, plot, and theme, or he/she risks losing the attention (and possibly even attendance) of the audience. Every moment, every word of dialogue or stage direction, must be essential to the story in one way or another. This is not to say that drama is a shallow or less intellectual form—far from it. The best plays (and there are many) are rich in both emotion and intellect and as full an experience as any form of literature. Nor does it mean plays cannot be appreciated when read rather than viewed. It does mean, however, that in reading them, it is best to extend the imagination in a different direction than when reading novels, short stories, or non-fiction. Our modern-day exposure to film and television has trained our imaginations to work in a primarily cinematic way; that is, we tend to imagine a film rolling in our head while absorbing the story we are reading. But to effectively read a play script, it is best to imagine a stage and actors



Dramatic Structure

THE EARLIEST KNOWN THEORY of dramatic structure was authored by Aristotle in *The Poetics*. He composed this hypothesis roughly fifty years after the death of Sophocles, the author of the tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, which Aristotle greatly admired. Aristotle believed that plot was the most important element of a tragedy, all other elements, such as character and theme, being subordinate to the arrangement of events in the story being told. The plot must be tightly constructed, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. The beginning is the “incentive moment,” or what we might now call the inciting incident. The middle of the play is the “climax,” the turning point of the story; it must clearly grow from the beginning and alter all the events that come after. The ending is the “resolution,” or what we might today term the denouement, which should bring the events of the play to a satisfying conclusion for the audience. The plot must have “unity of action,” meaning the chain of events is internally contained within the world of the play, not dependent on an outside force or “*deus ex machina*”—that is, each event of the plot clearly and inevitably leads to the next event. It should also have a degree of “magnitude”—in other words, be sufficiently complex in structure and have a certain depth of meaning and universality. A complex plot has “reversal of intention,” when a character’s actions produce the opposite of his or her intentions, as well as “recognition,” when a character emerges from ignorance into knowledge. These moments lead to the “catastrophe,” the tragic event that changes the protagonist forever.

This was the dominant theory of dramatic structure, which, to some degree still persists today, not only in theatre, but in film and television drama as well. Even in Aristotle’s era, however, there were plays that did not strictly conform to this premise. The difference became most pronounced, however, in Shakespearean tragedies, in which the course of

BERTA [*on the point of weeping*]. And do you think it wasn't hard for me too, Miss? After all the blessed years I've been with you and Miss Rina.

MISS TESMAN. We must make the best of it, Berta. There was nothing else to be done. George can't do without you, you see—he absolutely can't. He has had you to look after him ever since he was a little boy.

BERTA. Ah but, Miss Julia, I can't help thinking of Miss Rina lying helpless at home there, poor thing. And with only that new girl too! She'll never learn to take proper care of an invalid.

MISS TESMAN. Oh, I shall manage to train her. And of course, you know, I shall take most of it upon myself. You needn't be uneasy about my poor sister, my dear Berta.

BERTA. Well, but there's another thing, Miss. I'm so mortally afraid I **shan't** be able to suit the young mistress.



Shan't is the contraction of shall not. The modern American equivalent would be won't.

MISS TESMAN. Oh well—just at first there may be one or two things—

BERTA. Most like she'll be terrible grand in her ways.

MISS TESMAN. Well, you can't wonder at that—General Gabler's daughter! Think of the sort of life she was accustomed to in her father's time. Don't you remember how we used to see her riding down the road along with the General? In that long black habit—and with feathers in her hat?



Think about how much we have already learned about the characters, only a few moments into the first scene.

BERTA. Yes, indeed—I remember well enough—! But, good Lord, I should never have dreamt in those days that she and Master George would make a match of it.

MISS TESMAN. Nor I. —But by-the-bye, Berta—while I think of it: in future you mustn't say Master George. You must say Dr. Tesman.

BERTA. Yes, the young mistress spoke of that too—last night—the moment they set foot in the house. Is it true then, Miss?

MISS TESMAN. Yes, indeed it is. Only think, Berta—some foreign university has made him a doctor—while he has been abroad, you understand. I hadn't heard a word about it, until he told me himself upon the pier.

BERTA. Well, well, he's clever enough for anything, he is. But I didn't think he'd have gone in for doctoring people too.

MISS TESMAN. No, no, it's not that sort of doctor he is. [*Nods significantly.*]

HEDDA [*Looks at him with a smile*]. So you want to be cock in the basket—that is your aim.



The original Norwegian phrase is, “Eneste bane i kurven”—“the only rooster in the basket,” which means to be the chief or master; the hero of the hour; the one who has triumphed over his rivals.

BRACK [*nods slowly and lowers his voice*]. Yes, that is my aim. And for that I will fight—with every weapon I can command.



The Judge seems to be somehow jealous of Lövborg, as if he suspected the nature of Lövborg and Hedda’s previous relationship and will fight to see that it is not rekindled.

HEDDA [*her smile vanishing*]. I see you are a dangerous person—when it comes to the point.

BRACK. Do you think so?

HEDDA. I am beginning to think so. And I am exceedingly glad to think—that you have no sort of hold over me.



Something has been revealed about the Judge’s character, and Hedda’s response might foreshadow future events.

BRACK. [*laughing equivocally*]. Well, well, Mrs. Hedda—perhaps you are right there. If I had, who knows what I might be capable of?

HEDDA. Come, come now, Judge Brack! That sounds almost like a threat.

BRACK. [*rising*]. Oh, not at all! The triangle, you know, ought, if possible, to be spontaneously constructed.

HEDDA. There I agree with you.

BRACK. Well, now I have said all I had to say; and I had better be getting back to town. Good-bye, Mrs. Hedda. [*He goes towards the glass door.*]

HEDDA [*rising*]. Are you going through the garden?

BRACK. Yes, it’s a short cut for me.

HEDDA. And then it is a back way, too.

BRACK. Quite so. I have no objection to back ways. They may be piquant enough at times.



Remember that the phrase of “back ways” can also be translated as “underbanded or deceitful ways. Piquant means exciting or interesting.

HIGGINS: *[wondering at her]* You damned impudent slut, you! But it's better than snivelling; better than fetching slippers and finding spectacles, isn't it? *[Rising]* By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you; and I have. I like you like this.



In British slang, slut did not have the sexual connotation that it has in contemporary American slang.

LIZA: Yes; you turn round and make up to me now that I'm not afraid of you, and can do without you.

HIGGINS: Of course I do, you little fool. Five minutes ago you were like a millstone round my neck. Now you're a tower of strength: a consort battleship. You and I and Pickering will be three old bachelors together instead of only two men and a silly girl.

[Mrs. Higgins returns, dressed for the wedding. Eliza instantly becomes cool and elegant.]

MRS. HIGGINS: The carriage is waiting, Eliza. Are you ready?

LIZA: Quite. Is the Professor coming?

MRS. HIGGINS: Certainly not. He can't behave himself in church. He makes remarks out loud all the time on the clergyman's pronunciation.

LIZA: Then I shall not see you again, Professor. Good bye. *[She goes to the door].*

MRS. HIGGINS: *[coming to Higgins]* Good-bye, dear.

HIGGINS: Good-bye, mother. *[He is about to kiss her; when he recollects something].* Oh, by the way, Eliza, order a ham and a Stilton cheese, will you? And buy me a pair of reindeer gloves, number eights, and a tie to match that new suit of mine, at Eale & Binman's. You can choose the color. *[His cheerful, careless, vigorous voice shows that he is incorrigible].*

LIZA: *[disdainfully]* Buy them yourself. *[She sweeps out].*

MRS. HIGGINS: I'm afraid you've spoiled that girl, Henry. But never mind, dear: I'll buy you the tie and gloves.

HIGGINS: *[sunnily]* Oh, don't bother. She'll buy em all right enough. Good-bye.

[They kiss. Mrs. Higgins runs out. Higgins, left alone, rattles his cash in his pocket; chuckles; and disports himself in a highly self-satisfied manner.]



What does it say about Higgins that he is alone onstage at the end, the only one not attending the wedding?

END OF PLAY

Questions on Character

1. How does Shaw immediately establish the characters of Higgins and Eliza?
2. What, if anything, do the two characters have in common?
3. How does this color the relationship Shaw portrays between them?
4. How does Shaw employ the characterization of the supporting players to define the world of the play?
5. Quote an example from the play that illustrates Alfred P. Doolittle's character and outlook.
6. What impact do Pickering's, Mrs. Pearce's, and Mrs. Higgins's characters have on the story?
7. How do both Higgins and Eliza—and their relationship—change in the course of the play?