

# Play Analysis

**A Casebook on Modern Western Drama**

R. J. Cardullo



*SensePublishers*

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## INTRODUCTION

From the essays included in this book, one will quickly discover that my preoccupations as a critic are not theoretical. I am, rather, a “close reader” committed to a detailed yet objective examination of the structure, style, imagery, characterization, and language of a play. As someone who once regularly worked in the theater as a dramaturg, moreover, I am concerned chiefly with dramatic analysis that can be of benefit not only to playreaders and theatergoers, but also to directors, designers, and even actors—that is, with analysis of character, action, dialogue, and setting that can be translated into concepts for theatrical production, or that can at least provide the kind of understanding of a play with which a theater practitioner could fruitfully quarrel. Many of the plays considered in this volume are regularly produced, especially by university theaters, and it my hope that these explicatory essays and notes will in some small way make a contribution to future stagings. A number of these dramas—such as those by Shaw, Strindberg, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller—are also routinely treated in high school and college courses on dramatic literature, so it is also my hope that the relatively short (and therefore less intimidating, more accessible) pieces contained in *Play Analysis: A Casebook on Modern Western Drama* will serve students as models for the writing of play analyses.

What follows is the explication of a method for playreading and analysis, not in the conviction that such a method will exhaust every value in a play, but in the hope that it will uncover the major areas the reader of plays should consider. Let no one assume that fruitful analysis of plays is a matter of simple enumeration or of filling in blanks on a comprehensive questionnaire. Analysis also involves judgment. There is no shortcut to cultivating an ear for good dialogue, an eye for effective staging, or a feeling for proper balance and structure in the work as a whole. Just as the reader will better understand what a play is by reading and seeing as many plays as possible, so will he or she better analyze and interpret plays by having read, seen, *and* extensively thought about them. All I can do here is to cite some of the approaches that have proved useful to readers in the past.

Although some beginning readers assume a hostility between reading and analysis, I must stress that the two activities are thoroughly compatible. Indeed, beginning students sometimes evidence a mistrust of any kind of literary analysis. It gains expression in the form of such statements as “I enjoyed the work for itself. Why spoil it by taking it apart?” Analysis, literary criticism, and the consideration and discussion of ideas are not designed, however, to spoil literary works; they are intended to widen and deepen our appreciation of those works. We may even say that consideration and discussion are different stages in the same process: that of enjoying and understanding a play. Good analysis grows out of a thorough and informed reading and only out of such a reading.



## INTRODUCTION

### READING THE PLAY

As one sits down to read a play, one ponders the question, “What is it about?” Before one can answer this or any other query, one needs some general conception of what a play, any play, is supposed to be. To emphasize only the central idea of drama, I can remind the student of the Aristotelian dictum that a play is an “imitation of an action” in the form of an action. The reader should therefore seek to experience in reading, even as one experiences in the theater itself, the depiction of a total coherent action in terms of a number of subordinate actions. Moreover, the reader ought to be disposed toward a high degree of imaginative participation in a play. Since the playwright himself always has an eye on some ideal performance in a theater, the reader should allow his or her imagination to supply some of the details of that performance just as the dramatist has done. The willing suspension of disbelief that Coleridge asked from readers of poetry must be paralleled, or exceeded, by a willing entry into the world of the play’s action on the part of the playreader.

All of the above is general. What, specifically, does a reader do? The following observations are meant to make clear what a reader may do. First, read the play through for story and plot. Your first reading should concentrate on continuity, mood, and impact. After reading the play, review the plot and story in your mind. Seek to apprehend what the total action of the play is. Here, aids such as plot summaries are not bad or wrong, provided they are used as aids and not substitutes. No reliance should be placed on plot summaries by themselves; however, as a means of clarifying the play and reminding the reader of the major events and their sequence, plot summaries can serve a useful purpose.

It is always advisable, in reading a play for the first or second time, to make brief notes about problem passages by any method the reader find convenient. These notes may refer to matters other than the meanings of archaic or difficult words and expressions. For example, one may want to ask oneself about certain characters or events. Questions like these could form the basis for subsequent reading in detail, which should take place when one is satisfied that one knows the action of the play well and has a good idea of its overall import and pattern. At this point, however, one can go back and either read the whole at a slower and more reflective pace or concentrate on particular passages that initially presented problems or seemed to carry special weight.

During a reading of this kind, some of the issues that will later figure in analysis will occupy an important place in one’s considerations. Ask oneself whether one can see the necessity for all the characters in the play. Why is a certain character there? What does his or her presence contribute? Examine language and tone. Try to imagine how a key scene would be staged. These matters, and many more, can be examined at length and in depth as one rereads with a solid knowledge of the whole’s play’s action; but in one’s initial readings, one is still primarily concerned with getting to know the play as thoroughly as possible. When one has the play

and its events clearly in mind, one can begin to analyze in a more abstract sense, although analysis has in fact been taking place in one's mind all along.

## ANALYSIS

Critical analysis, I have already said, must grow out of a thorough reading. So necessary is this that, as a general rule of procedure in analysis, we can say: When in doubt reread the work, whether this means a scene, an act, or even the whole play. Careful reading and verification through reference to the play are the only ways to guard against an analysis that is spun out on a slender thread and has become irrelevant to the work in question. A good analysis will touch on the literary text point after point.

The best way to proceed in analysis is to begin with questions of technique and then move to matters of interpretation. In this way, one can again begin with the work itself and base one's evaluation on a careful study of the work. Analysis of technique can be thought of as a more penetrating kind of reading. It must rest on an understanding of the entire play because, in general, it seeks to answer the question, "How is this or that done?" Let us assume that one has a good overall picture of the play; one has a view of its total meaning as well as solid conceptions of character and situation. One should then ask oneself *how* the dramatist conveyed the view one has, always leaving open the possibility that one's reading has been incomplete or improperly weighted. What one will be doing, in effect, is applying what one knows about the drama to a particular play.

Reading and the detailed analysis of technique should lead to something more, something we may call understanding or interpreting the meaning of the play. The question of a play's meaning is sometimes expressed in terms of theme; sometimes in terms of the dramatist's attitude toward his or her subject; and, sometimes, in terms of Aristotle's identification of thought (*dianoia*) as one of the ingredients of drama. Theme in literary works is taken to denote an abstract idea that a work embodies and somehow, in its totality, expresses. In the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton states his theme early: to "assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to man." Plays rarely contain such explicit declarations of theme. Moreover, the statement of a single theme may not necessarily capture all of work; there may be several themes or several ways of expressing a general theme. Thus, some speak in terms of understanding the dramatist's attitude toward his or her subject. How does the play present events? What does the playwright intend us to comprehend through the action he or she has captured? In Aristotle's terminology, what is the "thought" of the play as a whole? Since plays use words and actions based on, or related in a meaningful way to, human life, they must inevitably convey some thought about life. In discussing the meaning of a play, one endeavors to make clear what that thought is.

However we term our pursuit—theme, attitude, thought—we must not forget that it lies embedded in the work as a whole and that we perceive it from the experience

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of reading or seeing the play and analyzing that play as thoroughly as possible. But we must guard against making a drama a tract and against overemphasizing the specific verbal expressions of characters in the drama. Instead, we must attempt to make our apprehension of meaning consistent with the total action the play depicts. Therefore, if a statement by a character in the play is taken as the theme, it should be because that statement is a fair assessment of the entire direction of the drama.

The problem of determining theme may be illustrated by referring to plays in which there are clear spokespersons for the author's ideas. In the nineteenth-century well-made play (*pièce bien-faite*), there was usually a character who spoke for the dramatist. This character is called the *raisonneur* (literally, the reasoner) of the play because he or she advances the author's ideas on a subject of interest that is also the issue of the drama. The device did not die with the well-made play, and *raisonneurs* in various guises are still encountered in plays and films. Often they are "second characters" rather than protagonists, and, not infrequently, the action stops while the reasoner presents the "message" of the play. This device is considered too artificial to make truly excellent drama, since it relieves the author of the task of making his point or idea a part of the texture of the play itself; such "messaging" can even backfire if the author's head is at war with his or her heart. For example, Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings' *What Price Glory?* (1924) is supposed to be an anti-war play, according to the authors' stated intentions; but the total impact of the play seems to argue more that war is fun than that war is hell. Determining the meaning of a play, then, is not a question of finding an official spokesperson for the dramatist, but of finding the center of gravity of the work itself.

It is in determining the meaning of a play that we should call upon our thorough knowledge of the work obtained through our analysis. One could well say that the final purpose of analysis is synthesis. We examine the parts of a play in detail in order to attain a better understanding of the whole; we analyze in order to know, in the deepest sense, what the play is about. Analysis assumes that there has been a pattern of action presented through plot, structure, character, language, music or rhythm, and (imagined) spectacle, a pattern that has a meaning of its own which emerges only through the congruent interaction of the parts of a play. Therefore, characters as we know them through their words and actions; the language of the drama as it both explicitly defines what is going on and projects an atmosphere that suggests it; the symbolism as it brings together a group of associations within the play as well as over and above it—all of these together constitute the meaning of the play. It seems necessary that they be experienced before such meaning can be fruitfully discussed. For this reason, we want to guard against the facile summation offered by a *raisonneur*.

Although the device of the *raisonneur* may be contrived, one must still formulate one's experience of the play in words, and there may well be characters in plays who utter remarks that seem, to the reader or spectator, to sum up the essential meaning of the work. Some would find in Gloucester's comment in *King Lear* (1606), "As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods. / They kill us for their sport," an instance

of Shakespeare's expressing his own convictions. This may be the case. However, the test lies not so much in determining which (if any) character is the spokesperson, as in determining whether the action of the play bears out the alleged summation. In *King Lear*, it is not Gloucester's saying it that constitutes the most important argument for the truth of his comparison (indeed, his saying it might argue against its truth), but the belief that this sentiment adequately conveys the central idea of the drama as the action reveals it. Were we to seek a spokesperson as such, Gloucester's son Edgar would serve much better. He is a sympathetic character who, among other things, remains loyal while others are shedding old loyalties, and who leads his father to self-understanding despite his father's rejection of him. Because of Edgar's character and conduct, what he says is likely to be of consequence in the play. Nevertheless, the true test is still whether his words are borne out by the total action of the play.

The question that arises in the case of any statement by a character in a play must always be the same: Does this statement fairly represent the thought of the play as a whole? Is it wrongheaded or, perhaps, only a partial view? Here is where careful reading and the careful analysis of technique—in this case, verbal technique—will make the difference. If in *King Lear*, Gloucester's statement is true, how do we account for the sensation of triumph in defeat that great tragedies, including this one by Shakespeare, so often project? Gloucester's remark may be paralleled, it is true, by Lear's own haunting, "I am bound upon a wheel of fire." And there is no question that the two observations epitomize the intense suffering endured by both men in the play. However, do these two observations account for the action in its entirety? If so, why does Shakespeare arrange for order to reassert itself at the end of the play in the form of Albany? Why does Shakespeare not feel impelled to show the world in total chaos at the drama's conclusion, so as to drive home the idea that men are meaningless insects to wanton gods?

Is it not more likely, then, that Gloucester's comment, like Lear's in his agony, must be balanced by the other side shown in the play—the one represented by Cordelia, by the loyal and perceptive Edgar, by Lear's own understanding of himself? What of the serenity of Lear as he rises above the petty intrigues and selfish squabbles of his world when he declares, "We two will sing like birds i' the cage"? Or Edgar's comment to Gloucester himself: "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all." Even more significant, what about Edgar's forgiveness of his brother, Edmund, when he urges, "Let's exchange charity" and says, of the same gods his father earlier had likened to wanton boys, "The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us"? This certainly suggests a more purposeful procedure in the universe than Gloucester's assertion. Finally, what of Albany's statement close to the end of the play: "All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their desertings"?

In a play as rich as *King Lear*, we perhaps cannot expect to find a spokesman to sum up all that Shakespeare wanted the play to contain. Nor need we feel that single line or two from any one character must be found. Certainly, though, some of the

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major issues of the drama are powerfully evoked by the lines cited above, and they can at least form the basis for an intelligent and thoughtful examination of the play's meaning. If the one's analysis leads to such an examination, one will be justified in believing that analysis has been worthwhile. In the end, the statement of a play's meaning, the result of thorough analysis and careful interpretation, comes very close to answering the deceptively simple question with which one begins the reading of any drama: "What is it all about?"

## AIDS IN INTERPRETATION

Plays, like every other work of art, occur in definite times and places and bear upon them the marks of a specific culture and set of circumstances. Great interest attaches to such matters of context because they often contribute to our understanding of works from the past. But beginning students are sometimes distrustful of this interest. As they distrust analysis and abstraction for their presumed deadening effect on the work of art, so too do they distrust "external" considerations for their presumed irrelevance. Both suspicions are misplaced, at least as far as the sincere and measured lover of literature is concerned. We do not want "the tail to wag the dog" in this instance, but neither do we want to chop the tail off. We must keep in mind that the reason we do not always have to read social history or literary biography or comparative religion to understand the latest novel is simply that it is of our own time. However, once the concerns of a period transform themselves into other concerns—that is, once current events become history—the same problems that beset us in reading older literary works will present themselves to our descendants when they read the works of our day. These supposedly external matters, then, are actually part of the culture that any writer assumes as he or she writes.

The problem for students of literature is in knowing what else to study and how to evaluate it. Each work of art will present different problems because some works will be more complex than others. Countless periods and times come under our scrutiny, and each play will make different demands on our knowledge and offer different rewards. This is precisely why the study of literature, dramatic or otherwise, is so fundamentally humanizing: it constantly directs the student to wider fields of investigation and thus to a wider understanding of life. I shall now briefly review the areas that frequently impinge on literature in order to suggest the scope of possible auxiliary study.

*Literary history and biography.* Literary history, broadly construed, is the study of literature as an extended body of material with innumerable interconnections among its constituent parts (individual works) and innumerable influences and parallels that exhibit a continuity and pattern over time. Besides being an individual literary work, every play occupies a place in literary (not to speak of theatrical) history. Literary history is that discipline concerned with establishing the context in which a work appears, that is, the shifts in taste and practice that have exerted influence

on writers at different times. Plays can frequently be better understood when we know something about their literary context. Biographies of authors, in turn, arise from our interest in literary works and the men and women who produced them. Occasionally, biographical information will illuminate a literary work, although extreme caution must be urged on the beginner not to treat an individual play as a biographical document. For the most part, the non-specialist will derive the greatest assistance from what we may call literary biography, or an understanding of the author's literary development, his or her interest in certain themes, styles, and the like at various points in his or her career. The application of personal biography to literature is perhaps nowhere so delicate as in the drama, where an autobiographical spokesperson for the author is even rarer than an ideological spokesperson. Still, a knowledge of literary history and literary biography will contribute considerably to our understanding of the development of drama in general and of the place a particular play occupies in that development, as well as in the culture at large.

*Political and social history.* Since the drama inevitably reflects life, it does so in terms of a particular time, a particular place, and particular issues. Indeed, a knowledge of the political and social conditions of the time of the play can be so important as to be indispensable to an understanding of an individual work. (Non-literary historical elements are similarly important in considering the various playhouses that have been used throughout the evolution of the drama, for the design of a theater can become a matter of literary consequence as well.) Generally, the more one knows about life and society during the period in which a play was written, the greater will be one's comprehension of the work itself. Of course, we do not want history, as such, to usurp the place of the literary artifact; as in all such auxiliary studies, one investigates the social and political history of the period in which a play was written so as to understand the work better.

*Other disciplines.* There are any number of other disciplines that we can call upon in interpreting plays, in particular, and literary works in general. Again, these disciplines these should be approached with caution. Yet plays do treat human psychology; they have social dimensions; and they may embody certain religious tenets or philosophical beliefs. They may even have affinities with other arts or literary types. Verse plays, for example, are also poetry and can be looked at from the perspective of poetry. Many critics approach all literary works from one or another point of view. Some apply Freudian or Freudian-based psychology in their interpretations; some consider certain plays as an expression of existentialist philosophy and other plays as exemplars of the Christian religion; others see all literary works in terms of their attitude toward social classes. Since dramatists frequently treat psychological, social, political, and religious matters in their plays, we can hardly rule out the aid derived from disciplines like psychology, sociology, religion, philosophy, and arts other than theater when we examine plays. As always, the key lies in maintaining a proper perspective on the literary work so that it does not become a mere excuse

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for our discovery of a favored theory or doctrine—Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, and the like.

## A NOTE ON ORGANIZATION

Since students typically get essay assignments of the following kind, *Play Analysis: A Casebook on Modern Western Drama* is designed to show them how, through carefully grouped, concrete examples, they might set about completing such assignments:

1. “Choose an important character in such-and-such a play and analyze his or her dramatic function. That is, why is this character in the play and what does he or she contribute to the development of its theme?”
2. “What type of structure does such-and-such a play have: climactic, episodic, or cyclical? From a thematic point of view, why did the playwright use such a structure?”
3. “Choose two plays that are similar in style, structure, or meaning and compare, as well as contrast, them. Has one work directly (or indirectly) influenced the other, as in the case of a drama made into a film? What are the differences in socio-historical context between the two works if they are plays from different periods? Is one of these works superior to the other, and, if so, why?”

As *Play Analysis: A Casebook on Modern Western Drama* is divided into the sections “Plot and Action, or Form and Structure,” “Character and Role,” “Style and Genre,” “Language, Symbol, and Allusion,” “Theme, Thesis, Thought, or Idea,” and “Re-evaluation and Influence” (naturally, with some overlap among the sections)—with each heading introduced by a “Key Analytical Question”—the reader can easily go to the appropriate section and find two examples of the kind of essay he or she has been assigned to write. Supplementing the essays in this book is a useful critical apparatus consisting of a Step-by-Step Approach to Play Analysis, a Glossary of Dramatic Terms, Study Guides, Topics for Writing and Discussion, a list of Bibliographical Resources, and a comprehensive Index.

There remains to be said only a word about playreading and theatergoing. These activities should never be considered as mutually hostile. Reading is no substitute for the experience of a live performance; neither, however, is it a secondary or useless activity. Certainly, one will be a better reader of plays by becoming a spectator of productions; similarly, one will be a better spectator by becoming a reader. We must remember that good theatrical productions are the result of intelligent readings. There is, finally, an advantage enjoyed by the reader of plays. Once the performance is over, “these our actors,” as Prospero says in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* (1611), prove to be “all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air.” For the reader, they may come back to life again, and again, on the printed page.

## A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO PLAY ANALYSIS

### *I. Analysis of Plot and Action*

1. What are the given circumstances of the play's action? Geographical location? Historical period? Time of day? Economic environment? Political situation? Social milieu? Religious system?
2. From what perspective do we see the events of the play? Psychological? Ethical? Heroic? Religious? Political?
3. What has the dramatist selected of the possible events of the story to put into actual scenes? Which events are simply reported or revealed through exposition?
4. Drama is action and the essence of action is conflict. Insofar as a situation contains conflict, it is dramatic: no conflict, no drama. Drama is the process of *resolving* conflict, and what is most important in dramatic analysis is to perceive the conflict inherent in the play. Conflict creates characters, or characters—their opposing desires or needs—create conflict. To understand a dramatic text or playscript, it is necessary to discover and expose the conflict. What, then, is the conflict in the play in terms of opposing principles? What kinds of qualities are associated with either side, or with *all* sides? Or, considering the principal characters as “ideas” or ethical/moral agents, into what sort of dialectic can you convert the plot? What is opposing what?
5. Where has the dramatist pitched the emphasis in his story, as an unfolding action? (For example, the long and careful approach to the “kill” in *Hamlet* versus the relatively quick “kill” followed by the long and haunted aftermath in *Macbeth*.) What has happened before the play, and what happens during the play? (For instance, the late point of attack in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, whose plot has a considerable past, versus the early point of attack in *King Lear*, in which the past is virtually nonexistent.)
6. How many acts and scenes are there? Did the play's author note them or were these divisions added later? What motivates the divisions of the play and how are they marked (curtains, blackouts, etc.)?
7. Are there subplots? If so, how is each related to the main action?
8. What alignments, parallels, or repetitions do you notice? (For example, the triple revenge plot in *Hamlet*; the blind Teiresias who can really “see” from the start as contrasted with the blind Oedipus who can really “see” only at the end of the play.)
9. What general or universal experience does the plot seem to be dramatizing?



## A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO PLAY ANALYSIS

### *II. Analysis of Character*

1. Assuming that each character is *necessary* to the plot, what is the dramatic function of each? (For instance, why does Shakespeare give Hamlet a close friend, but no friend to Macbeth or Othello?)
2. Do several characters participate in the same “flaw” or kind of fallibility? (For example, Gloucester and Lear are both blind to the true nature of filial love.)
3. Is there a wide range of character “positions” respecting such antitheses as innocence-guilt, good-evil, honorableness-dishonorableness, reason-irrationality, etc.?
4. What qualities or aspects of character are stressed: the physical, the social, the psychological, or the moral or ethical? (For instance, Ibsen’s “ethical” character versus Chekhov’s character of “mood” or frustrated sensibility: Aeschylus’s “grand,” sculptural character versus Euripides’ “psychopathic” character.)
5. How is character revealed? By symbols and imagery (Macbeth’s preoccupation with blood and time)? By interaction with various other characters (Hamlet with Horatio and Ophelia)? By what the character says? By what others say about the character? By what the character does? (the most important). By descriptions of the character in the stage directions?
6. How do character traits activate the drama? (Note how a character’s traits are invariably involved in his or her acts as motives for, or causes of, those acts.)
7. Consider each character as a “voice” in the play’s overall dialectic, contributing to theme, idea, or meaning.
8. What evidence of change can you detect? What seems to have been the source of this change, and what does it signify for the play’s theme or the final nature of the character’s identity?
9. How is the character’s change expressed dramatically? (For example, in a “recognition” speech, in a newfound attitude, in a behavioral gesture, etc.)

### *III. Analysis of Language*

1. The dialogue is the primary means by which a play implies the total makeup of its imaginative world and describes the behavior of all the characters that populate that world. For any one passage of dialogue in a play, ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. What happens during this dialogue and as a result of this dialogue?
  - b. What does this passage reveal about the inner life and motives of each character?
  - c. What does this scene reveal about the relationships of the characters to each other?
  - d. What does this section reveal about the plot or about any of the circumstances contributing to the complication or resolution of the plot?

- e. What are the most notable moments or statements in this dialogue?
  - f. Are there any implicit or unspoken matters in this scene that deserve attention?
  - g. What facial expressions, physical gestures, or bodily movements are implied by the dialogue?
  - h. What props or set pieces are explicitly or implicitly called for in the dialogue or the stage directions?
  - i. What vocal inflections or tone of voice does a line suggest?
  - j. Where might the characters increase or decrease the volume or speed of their delivery?
  - k. Where might the characters pause in delivering their lines?
  - l. Where might the characters stand on stage and in relation to each other at the beginning of the scene and at later points in the same scene?
2. Do all the characters use language in much the same way, or does each have his or her own verbal characteristics?
  3. What are the dominant image patterns? (For instance, disease-decay-death imagery in *Hamlet*.) Do characters seem to share a particular pattern, or is it exclusive to one character? (For example, Othello gradually begins to pick up Iago's sexual-bestial imagery as he becomes more convinced of Desdemona's guilt.)
  4. What combinations or confluences of image patterns can you detect? (For instance, in *Hamlet*, in the lines "By the o'ergrowth of some complexion, / Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason," the imagery of cancer, or pollution by "overgrowth," is conflated with military imagery.)
  5. Explain the presence of such rhetorical devices as: sudden shifts from verse to prose; rhymed couplets; "set" speeches that give the appearance of being standard or conventional (Polonius's advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*); choral speeches; formal "debates"; etc. These devices are often used to emphasize, or italicize, certain aspects of meaning and theme.
  6. How, generally, would you distinguish the use of language and imagery in this play from that of other plays? (For example, dramatic verse speech tends, on the whole, to "recite" the content directly and faithfully, presenting all the implications on the word-surface; as dialogue in plays becomes more realistic—becomes prose, that is—particularly from the nineteenth century forward, there is an increasing rift between what is actually said and what is implied, or latent, in the language.)
  7. In what ways does the language of the play—its imagery; style; tempo or rhythm; tone; descriptive, informational, or ideational content; and level of probability or internal consistency—help to create the sense of a unique "world," or circumscribed space, appropriate to this play and no other? (For instance, *Macbeth*'s dark, "metaphysical" space versus *Hamlet*'s dense and various world of objects, people, animals, and processes.)

## A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO PLAY ANALYSIS

### IV. General

1. What is the dramatist's attitude toward the materials of his or her play? (Skeptical? Critical? Ironic? Sympathetic? Neutral or objective? Etc.)
2. What features or elements of the play seem to be the source of the dramatist's attitude? (A reasonable or reasoning character you can trust? A choral element? A didactic voice detectable in the content as a whole? An allegorical quality? The way in which the incidents are arranged? A set of symbols? A balance or equilibrium of opposed readings of the world?)
3. What is the nature of the play's world order? (Fatalistic? Benign? Malignant? Just? Neutral?) Another way of asking this: Are there *operative* gods, and what share of the responsibility for events do they hold?
4. What is the source of your impression of this world order? Remember that meaning in drama is usually *implied*, rather than stated directly. It is suggested by the relationships among the characters; the ideas associated with unsympathetic and sympathetic characters; the conflicts and their resolution; and such devices as spectacle, music, and song. What, then, is the source of your impression of the play's meaning?
5. If the play departs from realism or representationalism, what devices are used to establish the internal logic of the action?
6. Are changes in the dramatic action paralleled by changes in visual elements such as lighting, costume, make-up, and scenery? How important is such visual detail to the dramatic action?
7. For what kind of theatrical space was the play intended by its author? Are some of the play's characteristics the result of dramatic conventions in use at the time the work was written?
8. How extensive are the stage directions? Were they written by the author or interpolated by someone else? What type of information do they convey? Are they important to the dramatic action?
9. Is the play a translation? Can you compare it to the original? Can you compare it with other translations? Are there significant differences between the source and a translation, such as the rendering of the author's original French verse in English prose?
10. Is there any difference between playing time (the time it takes to perform the play) and illusory time (the time the action is supposed to take)? What is the relationship between the two, if any?
11. Is there anything special about the title? Does it focus on a character, the setting, or a theme? Is it taken from a quotation or is it an allusion? Does the title contain a point of view, suggest a mood, or otherwise "organize" the action of the play?
12. Does the play clearly fall into one of the major dramatic categories (tragedy, comedy, etc.)? What conventional features of its type does the play exhibit (subject matter, situations, character types)? Does knowledge of the genre contribute to an understanding of this play?

**PART 1**

**PLOT AND ACTION, OR FORM  
AND STRUCTURE**

Key Analytical Question: “What type of dramatic structure or method does a particular play use, and how does this structure or method help to express the writer’s meaning?”

## CHAPTER 1

### THE FORM THAT 'CAN LONGER PAINT'

#### *Ibsen's Ghosts and Oswald*

Osvald Alving can be seen as a symbol of paralysis of the mind at the end of *Ghosts* (1881). His literal paralysis of the brain symbolizes the paralysis of mind that affects the society of Ibsen's time, the Norwegian society in which Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders, and the other characters of the play live, and from which Oswald has been absent since he was sent to live in Paris at the age of seven. Oswald is "dumb" at the end of the play, his mind paralyzed: suddenly, he is stripped of any psychological life of his own. He is pure, in a manner of speaking. He was "pure" in a similar way while abroad: "dumb" in that, for the most part, he was not communicating with his mother (he wrote occasionally and visited even less often); and without a full psychological life of his own, that is, one known to his mother, since she sent him away when he was seven years old and was never really in charge of his upbringing from that point on.

Osvald is not so "impure" during the play, either. He obviously has a full-formed psychological life of his own, but it is largely *his own*, and it is largely in reserve, since he is in a place and around people he does not know well. He complains about the weather a lot, and he criticizes the citizens of his hometown with a vengeance. To emphasize his foreignness to his "hometown," Ibsen even has him stand onstage through his entire first scene in hat and coat! William Archer has said of Oswald: "We cannot be said to know him, individually and intimately, as we know Helmer or Stockmann, Hjalmar Ekdal or Gregers Werle."<sup>1</sup> This is precisely so, as befits a realistic play, because no one onstage could truly be said to know him in this way. Oswald is, then, the perfect figure to serve as symbol: he is almost "pure," and therefore all the more effective as pure symbol, as opposed to symbol sullied by character.

Osvald has in fact been gradually assuming his symbolic role throughout the play as his own paralysis of the brain has been growing, or getting ready to strike, and his function as symbol at the end of *Ghosts* is the key to a fuller, richer interpretation of the play. Ibsen identifies his play with Oswald; that Oswald is an artist who can no longer paint should have tipped critics off to this long ago. Oswald's paralysis does not simply destroy Mrs. Alving's son, some virtual nonentity from abroad, but, Ibsen leads us to believe, *an artist* of great promise. I do not believe that the play is intended primarily as Mrs. Alving's tragedy, and I think that Ibsen made this clear by ending the play the way he did—without having Mrs. Alving poison, or not poison Oswald with morphine and then depicting the aftermath. To my knowledge, no critic has

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ever asked why specifically Ibsen ended *Ghosts* precisely at Mrs. Alving's moment of decision and did not show what that decision was. Most critics, of course, take the play, for better or for worse, as Helene Alving's tragedy, or as a simple drama of social protest and reform. They ignore, or are simply unaffected by the "formal" meaning of *Ghosts*' ending and concentrate instead on what has led up to it or what, they believe, will, or should have come after it.

Francis Fergusson serves as a salient example, since so many later critics use his discussion as a starting point. He writes in *The Idea of a Theater* that

the tragic rhythm of Mrs. Alving's quest is not so much completed as brutally truncated, in obedience to the requirements of the thesis and the thriller. Oswald's collapse, before our eyes, with his mother's screaming, makes the intrigue end with a bang, and hammers home the thesis. But from the point of view of Mrs. Alving's tragic quest as we have seen it develop through the rest of the play, this conclusion concludes nothing: it is merely sensational.<sup>2</sup>

I do not deny for a moment that *Ghosts* resembles a well-made play. I am also aware that "in accordance with the principles of the thesis play, *Ghosts* is plotted as a series of debates on conventional morality, between Mrs. Alving and the Pastor, the Pastor and Oswald, and Oswald and his mother."<sup>3</sup> But something Fergusson says earlier in his essay comes back to haunt him here, and to lead the way beyond Mrs. Alving's "truncated tragedy": "One may see, in *Ghosts*, behind the surfaces of the savage story, a partially realized tragic form of really poetic scope, the result of Ibsen's more serious and disinterested brooding upon the human condition in general."<sup>4</sup>

*Ghosts* resembles a well-made thriller, but in its shadow poetry is constantly lurking, and that poetry, that symbol, finally surfaces at the end. *Ghosts* is plotted as a series of debates on conventional morality, but it hardly hammers home a thesis at the end, a single-minded condemnation of the society that spawned the Alvings and their dilemmas. The play is, in reality, a latter-day tragedy on "the human condition in general"—not so much through Helene Alving, as *Oedipus Tyrannos* is a tragedy on the human condition through the example of Oedipus, as along with her. *Oedipus Tyrannos* (430 B.C.) is the tragedy of man, of self, of how the self conceives of its relationship to the Ideal or the Absolute, whereas *Ghosts* is a tragedy of two or more men, of the effect of men's actions on other men through the generations. Mrs. Alving is a part of the whole, in other words, but she does not stand for the whole, and she cannot be made to stand for it.

Let me illustrate this through the example of the very last moments in the play. Had the play continued, emphasis would have fallen on Mrs. Alving's state after the poisoning, or after her avoidance of it. By ending *Ghosts* at Mrs. Alving's moment of decision and by not showing what that decision is, Ibsen places emphasis on the object or symbol to be or not to be poisoned, and on *whether* it will be poisoned, not on the subject who will or will not do the poisoning. This is one of the reasons he has Mrs. Alving "paralyzed with fear" and "in speechless terror"<sup>5</sup> at the end: he nearly equates her condition here with Oswald's, so that, again, emphasis will fall on