

Course: Study of Literary Texts (L.T)
Level: 3rd year
Semester: second
Chapter: Modernist Drama and theatre
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Presentation of the Course

The course is designed for third year students as an introduction to Modernist and post-modernist views of literature. The first semester covered some of the major aspects and themes of modernism, illustrated further by some of the most renowned works of main authors of the stream.

Besides the theoretical presentation, the first semester focused on prose fiction and poetry. The second semester, however, will first deal with Drama and theatre , and once again a wrap up of the different theories of literary criticism, which will later be applied on the last literary work previously covered, i.e., Shakespeare's Hamlet .

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Introduction to English Drama and Theatre

Introduction

As a specific mode of fiction, Drama is different from the two previously introduced literary forms of expression (i.e. Prose Fiction and poetry) in that it is enacted (though there are some types of drama which are meant to be read). Dramatic arts, the rules which govern their performance on stage or even the very construction of dramatic texts, are conventionally designed according to “some collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception” (Weidmann, 2009). From the classical Athenian Sophocles, up to the contemporary works of Beckett and Pinter, western drama has evolved to cover different movements and philosophical orientations, and engendered some of the finest masterpieces of world literature.

Defining Drama

The word *drama*, is originally a Greek word which simply means “to do”. It follows that Drama (in its artistic sense) is always associated with such concepts as “performance”, “action”, “actors” and “stage”.

Though -technically- drama is a third mode of literary expression (besides prose and poetry), It shares with them the language properties, as it is either expressed in prose or verse. However, it is different in that it is usually in a dialogue form.

A dramatic text contains many elements which are equally found in fiction, such as plot, characters, themes, ..etc. This structure which is suggested by the playwright himself, constitutes the **primary text**. However, when taken to the stage, performed by actors and guided by a stage director, it (the primary text) evolves into what is called a

secondary text, which gives life to the characters (*dramatis personae*), stage direction and to scene descriptions.

Theatres and Plays

Through much of history, Theater has existed on three levels simultaneously:

1. As loosely organized popular entertainment, consisting of individuals or small groups, usually working outside established theatrical channels performing anything from circus skills to farcical plays for a mass audience. This form predates the oldest known plays and is exemplified today by commercial television.

2. As a mainstream public activity, which is most commonly literary drama performed at public theaters; it is usually commercial or else state supported for accessibility to the general public. Greek tragedy, medieval morality plays, and contemporary Broadway theater fall into this category.

3. As an elitist art form, most simply defined by its intended audience, a limited group with specialized tastes. This form ranges from the court performances of the Renaissance to modern avant-garde theater.

Dramatic Genres

The oldest examples of dramatic genres can be retraced to Aristotle's *Poetics*, written around 335 BC. Though he primarily made the distinction between the two major genres, several other subgenres have been suggested ever since.

The two main Genres are Tragedy and Comedy, thus, the two masks associated with theatre: They symbolize of the ancient Greek Muses, Thalia (the laughing face, the Muse of comedy), and Melpomene (the weeping face, Muse of tragedy).

1. The Tragedy

Aristotle defines the tragedy as: "The imitation in dramatic form of an action that is serious and complete, with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith it effects a

catharsis of such emotions. The language used is pleasurable and throughout appropriate to the situation in which it is used" (Poetics, 335 B.C).

What characterized the tragedy above all is that the plot revolves around a noble personage (the tragic hero) ("better than ourselves," says Aristotle), who is of a high stature and greatness, and the actions they perform are noble actions. The fall of the tragic hero has to arouse in the audience (or readers) the emotions of pity or fear. Nevertheless, this greatness doesn't mean "perfection", because, one of the characteristics of the tragic hero is his tragic flaw, *hubris*, which is often excessive pride or passion, and also *hamartia* (some errors) which lead to his downfall.

Additionally, some other central features of the Aristotelian archetype include:

2. Free choice: The hero's downfall her/his own fault, the result of his own free choice, not of pure accident or some overriding malignant fate.

3. The punishment usually exceeds the crime: the hero's misfortune is not wholly deserved, as he remains, despite his tragic flaw, admirable.

4. The tragic fall is not pure loss: though it may result in the hero's death, before it, there is some increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge or, as Aristotle puts it, some "anagnorisis" (discovery).

5. Catharsis and emotional release: Though it arouses solemn emotion (pity and fear, according to Aristotle), tragedy, when well performed, does not leave its audience in a state of depression. Rather, the main feeling which must be experienced in the tragedy is the purgation and purification of the audience's strong emotions.

Tragedies are of numerous kinds, to mention some, there are the **Senecan Tragedies** (five-acts stage plays which are recited rather than performed), **Revenge Tragedies** (which were very popular in the Elizabethan period and usually employed murder, madness, and revenge), **Domestic Tragedies** (about middle-class characters and mainly targeting the feeling of empathy instead of fear), and **Modern Tragedies** (with their modern conventions, including the anti-hero)

2. The Comedy

Comedies are essentially characterized by their depiction of human nature: while tragedies show greatness and grandeur in the tragic hero (who possesses overpowering individuality), comedies shed light on the weakness and human limitation. Laughter and the “comic element” express the acknowledgement of irrationality and some absurdity in humans.

A comedy is primarily social in nature; the protagonist is always in a group and represents “commonness”. If the tragedy is usually named after the tragic hero, the comic protagonist tends to be “a type” and the play is often named after the type (The Misanthrope, The Alchemist, The Brute).

In the comedy, the plot is not necessarily designed according to plausibility (cause-effect progression), and the organic unity is not a requirement. Most events happen haphazardly according to coincidences and improbable happenings.

The purpose of comedy is not just to amuse and entertain the audience, but it also helps to illuminate human nature and weaknesses by subtly reassuring the audience that even a disaster is something we can laugh about.

Comedies are of many kinds: **Romantic comedies**, **Satires** (which criticize social and political practices), **comedies of manners** (which ridicule the artificial and sophisticated behavior of the higher social class), **farces** (about exaggerated and caricatured characters, plots or behaviors), and **melodramas** (reinforcing a romantic or sensational plot with musical elements).

Dramatic Conventions

In drama, a playwright tries to present life as it is lived in the real world. However, it is not possible to present real life on stage, that’s why Drama is also considered as a presentation of an “illusion of reality”. But these “unrealistic devices” become conventions once viewers and reader accept them.

Dramatic conventions “necessary or convenient devices, widely accepted by the public, for solving problems imposed by a particular artistic medium in representing reality”. In plays, for example, many characters talk to themselves, which is unlikely to happen in real life (unless the character in question has a psychological or mental condition), but it is a convention found in many plays. Another example is the convention of dialogues in verse (it is a classical convention), but in modern times the convention in most plays the dialogue presented in prose. Another good example of dramatic convention is in play production where the convention is that a room has three walls instead of four and the action of a play in which the events take place in various places is presented on a single stage.

There are also conventions in terms of style, recurrent types of character, turns of plot, forms of versification, kinds of diction and style. It is not compulsory for every work to conform to preexisting conventions but what matters is how effectively an individual writer makes use of them.

Dramatic conventions include:

- a. The Prologue:** which is the introductory part of the play. It could be an opening scene, a speech or an address. In most cases, it introduces the action and makes a statement on what the audience should expect in the play. In many plays the prologue foreshadows the events in the play and sometimes gives its background.
- b. The Epilogue:** This is the direct opposite of the prologue. It is presented at the end of the play. It sums up the action of the play and in some cases, makes a statement (an advice or a lesson to be learnt) on the action or events presented in the play.
- c. The Interlude:** An interlude in a play is a short piece of entertainment that is presented between the acts or major scenes in a play. This convention was introduced during the Renaissance Period and it included some shows and short presentations.
- d. The Soliloquy:** this is a speech made by a character when he is alone. The audience hears it but the other characters are not expected to hear it. It is very common in Renaissance plays also. Shakespeare in particular made use of soliloquies in many of his plays.

Soliloquies are used as a device to reveal the thoughts or the feelings of specific characters in reaction to certain events or situations. Customarily, it is a means of giving expression to a complex state of mind and feeling, and in most cases the speaker is seen struggling with problems of utmost consequence.

Here, the character thinks aloud as he talks to himself. He pretends that the audience is not there. Soliloquy also offers the dramatist a means of providing a point of view on the action of the play. Apart from serving as a means for revealing characters, it is used to make significant commentaries on events of the play

Special Forms of Drama

a. The Opera: operas are special forms of dramatic art strongly intertwined with western classical music. the opera underwent enormous changes in the past four centuries, and the most worth noticing form is the one created by the German 19th century composer Richard Wagner who entirely renewed the operatic format, and emphasized the equal importance of music and Greek drama, calling "music dramas".

b. The Pantomime : They are plays conceived in the tradition of fables and folk tales, they shed light on a moral dilemma (in which the good always wins) and culminate into a lesson to be learned. Pantomime rely usually on stock characters seen in masque (commedia del arte), these characters include the villain, the clown, the servant, the lover... etc. They are very entertaining and popular as they are within the reach of all people.

Conclusion

If theater is viewed simply as a branch of literature or only as a form of narrative, then large segments of theater history are inevitably slighted. Some periods or cultures have emphasized dramatic literature (plays) but others have stressed aspects of theatrical production. Some cultures see the theater's value as a means of storytelling; others see it as religion, spectacle, or entertainment.

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Representative Work of Modernist Drama

Hamlet, By William Shakespeare

Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that Hamlet is not only one of the most famous and controversial works of William Shakespeare, but it is also the one work which best personifies the playwright's genius and demonstrates his ability to understand and express the universal awareness of human existence. The central character of the play, Prince Hamlet, captures the human complexity probably better than any literary character before (or after) him by his enigmatic presence, feigned (or genuine) madness, his pursue of truth and longing for avenging his father. All this, makes the work a rather Modernist masterpiece despite the fact that it was written in the 16th century.

Hamlet's dual nature, ignites immediate empathy. Hamlet is sensitive, poetic, artistic, and loving; he is also a criminal who stabs his friends in the back, treats his young girlfriend callously, and shows no remorse for deliberately murdering an "unseen good old man."

The Classical Elements of the Aristotelian Tragedy

As already introduced (refer to the previous lesson, about Drama and Theatre), the Aristotelian tragedy is built according to a set of standards, which interact in a synchronized way.

The play is written in such a way that the audience responds individually and collectively all at once. In other words, the tragic emotions of the play are shared by the

whole audience. It is worth remembering that, according to Aristotle, an effective tragedy culminates into **catharsis**; i.e. the audience is able to experience “all the emotions of pity and sympathy, fear and horror, tremendous grief and exhilarating happiness that are inherent in human life”.

As to the notion of the **tragic hero**, Aristotle emphasizes that- in the classical tragedy-the hero “is greater or larger than life”. Hamlet is a man of inner greatness, noble character and very praised manners, but his choices, like his internal dialogues, are not very clear-cut. It takes him a long time to decide whether to take action or not, and once decided, he is not sure how to accomplish his goal. These “human” qualities allow the audience to identify with Hamlet. We can understand this kind of hero and sympathize deeply with his plight.

The play is equally loaded with verisimilitude, believable characters and realistic yet, unpredictable action. Many complex emotions are entwined with varied characters diverse orientations: Intrigue, denied love, secret murder, revenge, war, referring to far-off places like Paris, Wittenberg, and England all contribute to the colorful, exciting, and unpredictable nature of the drama.

Originally, the playwright did not divide his oeuvre to the conventional this acts and scenes. It was only in 1676 that they were added by theatrical practitioners. They explained that, because the play comprises three main kinds of scenes (Domestic and family scenes, Court scenes and soliloquies scenes), there was a need to divide them as such in order to help clarify the actions, nature of man, the dilemmas posed by fate and the shifts in place and mood.

The controversy over the Interpretation of the Paly

The most enduring thing about Hamlet, which (at the same time) keeps the play vibrant for every age, is that there is no single way to understanding and interpreting the play: in a certain light, all interpretations can be validated, and all possibilities could be substantiated.

The debate over Hamlet's sense, the central character's mystery about his mental health, and questions such as how his life relates to modern man or what his relationships can teach us about human interaction, ...etc, all are questions which have always attended the examination of the play. And, interestingly enough, despite the numerous attempts to answer these and other questions, they still are unanswered and therefore the play still captivates us.

However, there are some common points of agreement: for example, right from the start, Hamlet has a clear imperative to avenge his father and act on "his medieval blood feud". It is only that his emotions tear him in two: On the one hand, he possesses the basic male need to assert his manhood and take the life of the killer of his father, on the other, his Christian belief and moral/scholar status compels him to hold back, since murder constitutes a sin no matter what the driving forces are.

Hamlet's individuality

Hamlet is portrayed as an individual (a very central theme in the modernist tradition) who represents the polar opposite of almost all the other male characters in the story. To state one example, his uncle/father King Claudius, who also occupies the same position as him (king/ heir to the Danish throne) is different from Hamlet in so many ways: Claudius personifies the Machiavellian villain, he justifies his wrongdoing by magnifying the ends of his wicked deeds. Probably the fact that Claudius recognizes his own evil and acknowledges his doomed status (he confesses that will assuredly descend into hell" makes him even more unstoppable in committing crimes in order to keep his ill-won spoils. On the other hand, Hamlet's expresses (and implied) desire to resist hating his uncle reinforces the tragic-hero status of the protagonist, and moves the audience. The very fact that he is so knowledgeable about his inability to seek forgiveness keeps him from being a traditional one-dimensional character.

Hamlet's Delay

According to many critics, the **tragic flaw** which makes Hamlet a tragic hero is his inability to make up his mind. However, Hamlet's "wild and whirling words", which mainly stem from his fine education and philosophical tendencies are what imprison

him. In a way, hamlet seems unable to turn his ideas into actions. His words control him until he realized that it is time to act, which is -ironically- the end of the play when he knows that he is dead and can now end the discussion, when he sighs that “The rest is silence.”

Hamlet’s State of Mind

If Hamlet had not delayed his revenge there would have been no play. Many explanations of the theme of delay have been offered ever since the play was enacted. But one of the most interesting (and very modernist) interpretation makes reference to another central theme of the paly, and which is Hamlet’s madness and state of mind.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Hamlet is “diagnosed” as suffering from an acute depressive illness, with some obsessional features. This is expressed in his inability to handle the heavy responsibility of taking revenge.

Obviously, during the Renaissance, there was no such as “acute depressive illness”, and Shakespeare did not “literally” use this word. However, the symptoms are very well depicted in the behavior of Hamlet: low mood, anhedonia, negative beliefs, and reduced energy. The prince essentially calls himself “melancholic” (II.ii.597) and the to be or not to be” soliloquy is viewed as a public statement of his melancholy. He further refers to hi anhedonic state with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, saying that he has “lost all his mirth and that man does not delight him” (II.ii.295–309). He frequently expresses negative beliefs and pessimism. He calls Denmark “a prison” (II.ii.243), his comments on women to Ophelia are bitter (III.i.111–51), and in the gravedigger scene he ponders lengthily on human mortality. He also made reference to sleep disturbance “were it not that I have bad dreams” (II.ii.255), and, according to Ophelia he neglects his appearance (II.i.78–80) .

Hamlet also quickly expresses his concerns and inadequacy in fulfilling the task assigned to him by his father’s ghost. He feels guilty not being able to act “Do you not come your tardy son to chide?” (III.iv.106–9) and “How all occasions do inform against me”IV.iv.32) . in another soliloquy, he utterly belittles himself because of this inability to take responsibility “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” (II.ii.545–583). Plainly

put, and according to modern psychoanalysts, indecision is a feature of both depressive and obsessional illness, and this depressive symptom is aggravated by a set of successive events: his father's sudden death, his mother's hasty marriage, and his disappointment in the succession.

The Psychoanalytical Views on Hamlet

According to Freud, "the play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motives for these hesitations". He considers that Hamlet's inhibition against taking vengeance on Claudius has an unconscious origin. In an anticipation of his later theories of the Oedipus complex, Freud suggests that Claudius has shown Hamlet "the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized" (his desire to kill his father and take his father's place with his mother). Confronted with this image of his own repressed desires, Hamlet responds with "self-reproaches" and "scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish."

On the other hand, Jungian psychanalysis suggests that Hamlet is driven by his **anima**: there seems to be an inclination to ignore the voice of the anima (which reminds him of his mother) and that is why he cannot achieve balance in his thoughts or actions.

An overview of the Play's Language

Shakespeare wrote the play (and other similar plays) combining verse (rhymed and/ unrhymed rhythmic patterned lines) and prose. The attribution of the type of expression followed the **Doctrine of Decorum** (which was a commonly used formula during the Elizabethan times).

According to that Doctrine, Highly ranked characters (such as kings, nobles, bishops, and gods,) spoke in verse, while Lowly ranked characters, such as clowns, laborers, and mad people, spoke in prose.

Shakespeare was also fond of puns and wordplay, where a word can mean more than one thing in a given context. And this is because he had the privilege to live and write during a time when elocution, memory, writing, and drama were taught as elemental parts of grammar school education. Moreover, his understanding of the classics allows him to beat his contemporaries and even many writers of the modern times. This does not mean that he exactly copied the same formats of his Roman predecessors, but then he expanded on their formulaic patterns to create richer and more insightful stories.

Shakespearean tragedies are known for their ability to picture the depths of the human mind and explore the complexities of human relationships, and Hamlet is no exception: a Renaissance prince; scholar, a lover of the arts, a wit, and a noble-man who is -additionally- concerned with the welfare of his people, but he is faced with a moral dilemma in response to the evil actions of his uncle. He knows that the choice he makes will ultimately mean his own destruction. Nevertheless, he takes the moral high ground, sacrificing his own desires for the greater good of doing what is right. The result is catastrophic for Hamlet and his family, but in another sense, Hamlet restores order in a universe turned upside down by the actions of the king.

Hamlet as an Anachronism

An anachronism occurs when a character is placed in a time or space different than his. Shakespeare rewrote the original, historical story of Hamlet, prince of Denmark, but it seems that he did not insist on putting the characters fit where he put them. The original Hamlet, for example, lived in seventh-century Denmark, but Shakespeare has him studying at Wittenberg, a university founded in 1502. This reference helped Shakespeare's audience to identify with the play and its characters. The audience would recognize that Hamlet is a scholar, that he is probably a Protestant, and that he would most likely be a skeptic — not a believer in spirits and ghosts.

The Dramatic Irony in Hamlet

Similar to verbal irony (using words or phrases which may convey multiple meanings), dramatic irony means achieving those multiple meanings through actions, and it has sometimes greater effects on the play. To illustrate from the play, the scene of Claudius repentance conveys the opposing meanings of “the appearance of prayer” Vs. “the inability to pray”.

Dramatic irony can also be achieved when the playwright makes one character know more than others do, and/or when the audience knows more than the rest of characters do. Hamlet’s soliloquies are a great source of dramatic irony, because they allow the audience to know more than the other characters about Hamlet’s state of mind.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Hamlet is a tragedy of human existence which transcends times and cultures. The combination of all the elements of classicism interwoven with a modernist touch makes it a unique work. That, in addition to the extent to which the central character, Prince Hamlet, incarnates all the complexity of the modern man, and his constant dissatisfaction with his very existence.

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