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3. Drama

Table of Contents:

3. Drama

3.1. Text and Theatre

When one deals with dramatic texts one has to bear in mind that drama differs considerably from poetry or narrative in that it is usually written for the purpose of being performed on stage. Although plays exist which were mainly written for a reading audience, dramatic texts are generally meant to be transformed into another mode of presentation or medium: the theatre.

For this reason, dramatic texts even look different compared to poetic or narrative texts. One distinguishes between the **primary text**, i.e., the main body of the play spoken by the characters, and **secondary texts**, i.e., all the texts 'surrounding' or accompanying the main text: title, **dramatis personae**, scene descriptions, stage directions for acting and speaking, etc. Depending on whether one reads a play or watches it on stage, one has different kinds of access to dramatic texts. As a reader, one receives first-hand written information (if it is mentioned in the secondary text) on what the characters look like, how they act and react in certain situations, how they speak, what sort of setting forms the background to a scene, etc. However, one also has to make a cognitive effort to imagine all these features and interpret them for oneself. Stage performances, on the other hand, are more or less ready-made instantiations of all these details. In other words: at the theatre one is presented with a version of the play which has already been interpreted by the director, actors, costume designers, make-up artists and all the other members of theatre staff, who bring the play to life. The difference, then, lies in divergent forms of perception. While we can actually see and hear actors play certain characters on stage, we first decipher a text about them when reading a play script and then at best 'see' them in our mind's eye and 'hear' their imaginary voices. Put another way, stage performances offer a multi-sensory access to plays and they can make use of **multimedia elements** such as music, sound effects, lighting, stage props, etc., while reading is limited to the visual perception and thus draws upon one primary medium: the play as text. This needs to be kept in mind in discussions of dramatic texts, and the following introduction to the analysis of drama is largely based on the idea that plays are first and foremost written for the stage.

The main features one can look at when analysing drama are the following:
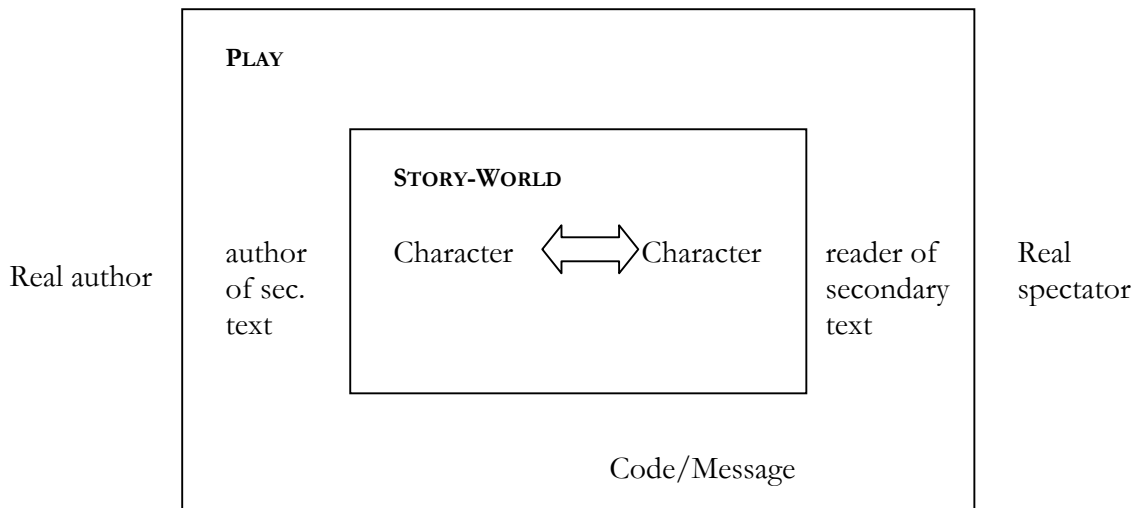
- information flow
- overall structure
- space
- time
- characters
- types of utterance in drama
- types of stage
- dramatic sub-genres

Key terms:
- primary text
- secondary text
- dramatis personae
- multimedia elements

3.2. Information Flow

Since in drama there is usually no **narrator** who tells us what is going on in the story-world (except for narrator figures in the epic theatre and other mediators, the audience has to gain information directly from what can be seen and heard on stage. As far as the communication model for literary texts is concerned (see Basic Concepts ch. 1.3.), it can be adapted for communication in drama as follows:

	PLAY			
		STORY-WORLD		
Real author	author of sec. text	Character ⟷ Character	reader of secondary text	Real spectator
		Code/Message		

In comparison with narrative texts, the plane of **narrator**/**narratee** is left out, except for plays which deliberately employ narrative elements. Information can be conveyed both linguistically in the characters' speech, for example, or non-linguistically as in stage props, costumes, the stage set, etc. Questions that arise in this context are: How much information is given, how is it conveyed and whose perspective is adopted?

3.2.1. Amount and Detail of Information

The question concerning the amount or detail of information given in a play is particularly important at the beginning of plays where the audience expects to learn something about the problem or conflict of the story, the main characters and also the time and place of the scene. In other words, the audience is informed about the 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'why' of the story at the beginning of plays. This is called the **exposition**. Consider the first act of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* The audience learns about where the play takes place (Athens and a nearby forest) and it is introduced to all the characters in the play. Moreover, we realise what the main conflicts are that will propel the plot (love triangle and unrequited love for Helena, Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius). Different variations of love immediately become obvious as the prominent topic in this play. Thus, we are confronted with Theseus' and Hippolyta's mature

relationship, young love in Lysander and Hermia, and love sickness and jealousy in Helena. The audience learns about Theseus' and Hippolyta's approaching wedding and the workmen's plan to rehearse a play for this occasion, about Lysander's and Hermia's plan to elope and Helena's attempt to thwart their plan. Generally speaking, the audience is well-prepared for what is to follow after watching the first act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The audience is given answers to most of the wh-questions and all that remains for viewers to wonder about is how the plot is going to develop and what the results will be.

Sometimes, the information we get is not as detailed as that and leaves us with a lot of questions. Consider the following excerpt from the first scene of Edward Bond's *Saved*:

> LEN. This ain' the bedroom.
> PAM. Bed ain' made.
> LEN. Oo's bothered?
> PAM. It's awful. 'Ere's nice.
> LEN. Suit yourself. Yer don't mind if I take me shoes off? (*He kicks them off.*) No one 'ome?
> PAM. No.
> LEN. Live on yer tod?
> PAM. No.
> LEN. O.
> *Pause. He sits back on the couch.*
> Yer all right? Come over 'ere.
> PAM. In a minit.
> LEN. Wass yer name?
> PAM. Yer ain' arf nosey.
> (Bond, *Saved*, 1)

The characters' conversation strikes one as being rather brief and uninformative. We are confronted with two characters who hardly seem to know each other but apparently have agreed on a one-night stand. We can conjecture that the scene takes place at Pam's house and later in that scene we are given a hint that she must be living with her parents but apart from that, there is not much in the way of information. We do not really get to know the characters, e.g., what they do, what they think, and even their names are only abbreviations, which makes them more anonymous. Although we can draw inferences about Len's and Pam's social background from their speech style and vocabulary, their conversation as such is marked by a lack of real communication. After watching the first scene, the audience is left with a feeling of confusion: Who are these people? What do they want? What is the story going to be about? One is left with the impression that this is a very anonymous, unloving environment and that the characters' impoverished communication skills somehow reflect a general emotional, educational and social poverty. This is reinforced by the barrenness of the living-room presented in the stage directions as follows:

> *The living-room. The front and the two side walls make a triangle that slopes to a door back centre.*
> *Furniture: table down right, sofa left, TV set left front, armchair up right centre, two chairs close to the table. Empty.*

If one bears in mind that the empty stage is the first thing the audience sees, it becomes clear that information is conveyed visually first before the characters appear and start talking. This is obviously done on purpose to set the spectators' minds going.

3.2.2. Transmission of Information

Although in drama information is usually conveyed directly to the audience, there are instances where a mediator comparable to the narrator (see ch. 2.5.) of a narrative text appears on stage. A theatrical movement where this technique was newly adopted and widely used was the so-called **epic theatre**, which goes back to the German playwright Bertolt Brecht and developed as a reaction against the realistic theatrical tradition (Kesting 1989; Russo 1998). At the centre of Brecht's poetics is the idea of alienating the audience from the action presented on stage in order to impede people's emotional involvement in and identification with the characters and conflicts of the story (**alienation effect** or **estrangement effect**). Instead, spectators are expected to gain a critical distance and thus to be able to judge rationally what is presented to them. Some of the 'narrative' elements in this type of theatre are songs, banners and, most importantly, a narrator who comments on the action. One must not forget that some of these elements existed before. Thus, ancient Greek drama traditionally made use of a **chorus**, i.e., a group of people situated on stage who throughout the play commented on events and the characters' actions. The chorus was also used in later periods, notably the **Renaissance period**. A famous example is the beginning of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, where the chorus bids the spectators to use their imagination to help create the play. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* also starts with a prologue spoken by a chorus (in the **Elizabethan theatre** the chorus could be represented by only one actor):

> 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-cross'd lovers take their life;
> Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
> Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
> The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
> And the continuance of their parents' rage,
> Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
> Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
> The which if you with patient ears attend,
> What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue)

As far as information is concerned, the main function of this chorus is to introduce the audience to the subsequent play. We learn something about the setting, about the characters involved (although we are not given any names yet) and about the tragic conflict. In actual fact we are already told what the outcome of the story will be, so the focus right from the start is

not on the question 'What is going to happen?' but on 'How is it going to happen?'. However, the chorus does more than simply provide information. The fact that the prologue is actually in **sonnet** form underlines the main topic of this tragedy, love, and a tragic atmosphere is created by **semantic fields** related to death, fate and fighting ("fatal loins", "foes", "star-cross'd", "death-mark'd", "rage", etc., see isotopy ch. 1.5.). At the same time, the audience is invited to feel sympathetic towards the protagonists ("piteous", "fearful"), and they are reminded of the fact that what is following is only a play ("two hours' traffic of our stage", "our toil"). One can say that information is conveyed here in a rather condensed form and the way this is done already anticipates features of the epic theatre, notably the explicit emphasis on acting and performance.

3.2.3. Perspective

Introductory information and narrative-like commentary need not necessarily be provided by a figure outside the actual play. In another of Shakespeare's plays, *Richard III*, for example, the main protagonist frequently comments on the events and reveals his plans in speeches spoken away from other characters (so-called **asides**, see ch. 3.7.2.). At the very beginning of this history play, Richard, the Duke of Gloucester, informs the audience about the current political situation and what he has done to change it:

> Now is the winter of our discontent
> Made glorious summer by this son of York;
> And all the clouds that lour'd upon our House
> In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
> Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,
> Our bruised arms hung up for monuments,
> Our stern alarums change'd to merry meetings,
> Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
> Grim-visag'd War hath smooth'd his wrinkled front:
> And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds
> To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
> He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber,
> To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
> […]
> Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
> By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,
> To set my brother Clarence and the King
> In deadly hate, the one against the other:
> And if King Edward be as true and just
> As I am subtle, false, and treacherous,
> This day should Clarence closely be mew'd up
> About a prophecy, which says that 'G'
> Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be-
> Dive, thoughts, down to my soul: here Clarence comes.
> (*Richard III*, I, 1: 1-41)

Richard tells the audience about his dissatisfaction with the current sovereign and he takes the audience into confidence as far as his plot against his brother Clarence is concerned. Throughout the play, Richard always comments on what happened or what his next plan is, which also means that most of the play is presented from Richard's **perspective**. This is another important aspect to bear in mind when discussing the mediation of information: Whose perspective is adopted? Are there characters in the play whose views are expressed more clearly and more frequently than others'? And finally, what function does this have? These questions are reminiscent of the discussion of **focalisation** in narrative texts (ch. 2.5.2.). In *Richard III*, for example, the undeniably vicious character of Richard is slightly modified by the fact that we get to know this figure so well. We learn that Richard is also tormented by his ugliness and we may thus be inclined to take that as an excuse for his viciousness. At the same time, we indirectly also become 'partners-in-crime', since we always know what will happen next, while other characters are left in the dark. Thus, whether we want it or not, we are taking sides with Richard to some extent, and the fact that he is such a brilliant orator might even give us a gloating pleasure in his cunning deeds and plots.

3.2.3.1. Dramatic Irony

The way information is conveyed to the audience and also how much information is given can have a number of effects on the viewers and they are thus important questions to ask in drama analysis. The discrepancy between the audience's and characters' knowledge of certain information can, for example, lead to **dramatic irony**. Thus, duplicities or puns can be understood by the audience because they possess the necessary background knowledge of events while the characters are ignorant and therefore lack sufficient insight. Narrators in narrative texts often use irony in their comments on characters, for example, and they can do that because they, like the audience of a play, are outside the story-world and thus possess knowledge which characters may not have.

    In the play *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Cyril Tourneur, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, irony is created because the audience knows about Vindice's plans of revenge against the Duke, who poisoned Vindice's fiancée after she resisted his lecherous advances. Vindice dresses up the skull of his dead lady and puts poison on it in order to kill the Duke, who in turn expects to meet a young maiden for a secret rendezvous. Vindice's introduction of the putative young lady is highly ironic for the viewers since they know what is hidden beneath the disguise:

> A country lady, a little bashful at first,
> As most of them are; but after the first kiss
> My lord, the worst is past with them; your Grace
> Knows now what you have to do;
> Sh'as somewhat a grave look with her, but –
> (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, III, 3: 133-137)

The **pun** on 'grave' (referring both to the excavation to receive a corpse and to the quality of being or looking serious) is very funny indeed, especially

since the Duke himself does not have the least suspicion that anything is wrong here. The irony is pushed even further by the appearance of the Duke's wife and Spurio, his bastard son, who are secret lovers and who made an appointment at the same place. They appear on stage while the Duke is still in the process of dying and thus fully aware of their presence, and they discuss possible ways of killing the Duke, albeit in a playful manner, not knowing that the duke is dying at that very moment. The irony becomes particularly poignant for the audience when Spurio and the Duchess talk about poisoning and stabbing the Duke, which is exactly what happened to the Duke just a minute before they appeared on stage. Thus, the audience's surplus of knowledge makes the scene incredibly ironic and potentially funny.

In contrast to this, lack of vital information can lead to confusion but it also contributes to a sense of suspense. As long as the audience is not fully informed about characters, their motives, previous actions, etc., the questions 'How did all this happen?', 'What is going on here?' and 'What's going to happen next or in the end?' become crucial.

SO WHAT?

Many plays employ the strategy of leaving the audience in the dark and it is easy to understand why they do it: they try to keep people interested in the play as long as possible. Detective plays typically use this device but other examples of **analytic drama** can also be found. Peter Shaffer's play *Equus*, for instance, only reveals in a piecemeal fashion all the events that led up to Alan's blinding of the horses. The play tells the story of the teenager Alan, who blinds six horses and subsequently undergoes psychotherapy. While the viewers know right from the start 'what' happened, they do not have a clue as to 'how' or 'why' it happened. This information is, like in a puzzle, gradually pieced together through conversations between Alan and the psychiatrist Dysart, Alan's memories and his acting out of these memories during his therapy. Thus, the audience is invited to speculate on possible motives and reasons, and the play becomes highly psychological not only on the level of the story-world but also on the level of the audience's reception of the play.

Lack of necessary information can also lead to surprises for the audience, and this is often used in comedies to resolve confusions and mixed-up identities. In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, the final scene reveals John (Jack) Worthing's true identity. The revelation, however, is further delayed by the fact that Jack mistakenly assumes that Miss Prism must be his mother:

> JACK [*Rushing over to Miss Prism.*] Is this the handbag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.
> MISS PRISM [*Calmly*] It seems to be mine. […] I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.
> JACK [*In a pathetic voice.*] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this handbag. I was the baby you placed in it.
> MISS PRISM [*Amazed*] You?

JACK[*Embracing her*] Yes…mother!

MISS PRISM [*Recoiling in indignant astonishment*] Mr Worthing! I am unmarried!

JACK Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against who has suffered? […] Mother, I forgive you. [*Tries to embrace her again.*]

MISS PRISM [*Still more indignant*] Mr Worthing, there is some error. [*Pointing to Lady Bracknell.*] There is the lady who can tell you who you really are.

[…]

(*The Importance of Being Earnest*, III)

The audience's knowledge of all the circumstances equals that of Jack. From earlier conversations in the play the spectators know that he was raised as an orphan by a rich gentleman after he had been found in a handbag in a cloakroom of Victoria Station. Thus, as soon as Miss Prism relates how she lost her handbag and, with it, a baby, the audience infers just like Jack that this baby must have been him. Since no further hint is given that Miss Prism is **not** Jack's mother, Jack's somewhat hasty conclusion that she must be seems plausible. What makes this scene particularly funny is the way the characters act and react on their ignorance or knowledge. Jack, wrongly assuming he finally found his mother, becomes very affectionate and tries to embrace Miss Prism. She, by contrast, reacts in a manner surprising to the audience and to Jack: She is indignant and recoils from him. Her explanation that she is unmarried increases suspense as this still does not reveal the final truth about Jack's origin but brings in another aspect highly topical at the time: morality, which Jack comments on accordingly. Finally, the puzzle is solved when Miss Prism points towards Lady Bracknell, who then tells Jack that he is in fact the son of her sister and thus his friend's, Algernon's, elder brother. All this comes as a surprise for both Jack and the audience, and it is really funny since Jack had all along pretended to have an imaginary brother.

The comedy is driven even further when Jack finds out that his real name is Ernest. Coincidentally, this is also the name he had used as an alias when he spent time in London, and his fiancée had declared categorically that she could only marry someone with the name of Ernest. Thus, everything falls into place for Jack and his problem of not being able to marry Gwendolen is resolved. The fact that the truth about Jack's real identity is hidden both from Jack and the audience for so long creates confusions right until the end and therefore contributes to numerous misconceptions and comical encounters. Information flow thus becomes an important device for propelling and complicating the plot, and it creates suspense and surprise in the viewer.

3.2. Structure

3.2.1. Story and Plot

As with the study of narrative texts, one can distinguish between story and plot in drama. **Story** addresses an assumed chronological sequence of events, while **plot** refers to the way events are causally and logically connected (see Story and Plot in Prose ch. 2.2.). Furthermore, plots can have various **plot-lines**, i.e., different elaborations of parts of the story which are combined to form the entire plot.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, is about the feud between two families, the love between the two families' children and their tragic death. This is roughly the story of the play, which is related in the prologue. The plot, by contrast, encompasses the causally linked sequence of scenes presented on stage to tell the story: Thus we are presented with a fighting scene between members of the two families whereby the underlying conflict is shown. This is followed by Romeo's expression of his love-sickness and Benvolio's idea to distract his friend by taking him to a party in the house of the Capulets. Subsequently, the audience is introduced to the Capulets, more specifically to Juliet and her mother, who wants to marry her daughter off to some nobleman, etc. All these scenes, although they seem to be unrelated at first glance, can be identified in retrospect as the foundation for the emerging conflict. The story is developed in a minutely choreographed plot, where the individual scenes combine and are logically built up towards the crisis. Thus, plot refers to the actual logical arrangement of events and actions used to explain 'why' something happened, while 'story' simply designates the gist of 'what' happened in a chronological order.

One might consider the distinction between story and plot futile at times because for most people's intuition a chronologically ordered presentation of events also implies a causal link among the presented events (see the discussion in 2.2.). Chronology would thus coincide with (logical) linearity. Whichever way one wants to look at it, plots can always be either **linear** or **non-linear**. Non-linear plots are more likely to confuse the audience and they appear more frequently in modern and contemporary drama, which often question ideas of logic and causality. Peter Shaffer's play *Equus*, for example, the story of Alan's psychiatric therapy. It starts at the end of the story and then presents events in reverse order (**analytic form**, see also the category of order ch. 3.5.3.2.). Although the audience is in a way invited to make connections among events in order to explain Alan's behaviour, the very process of establishing causality is questioned by the rather loosely plotted structure of scenes.

3.3.2. Three Unities

Older plays traditionally aimed at conveying a sense of cohesiveness and unity, and one of the classical poetic 'laws' to achieve this goal was the idea of the three unities: **unity of plot**, **unity of place**, and **unity of time**. Although only the unity of plot is explicitly addressed in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1449b and 1451a), the other two unities are also often attributed to him while, in reality, these concepts were postulated a lot later by the Italian

scholar Castelvetro in his commentary on Aristotle (1576). The unities mean that a play should have only one single plot line, which ought to take place in a single locale and within one day (one revolution of the sun). The idea behind this is to make a plot more plausible, more true-to-life, and thus to follow Aristotle's concept of **mimesis**, i.e., the attempt to imitate or reflect life as authentically as possible. If the audience watches a play whose plot hardly has a longer time span than the actual viewing of the play, and if the focus is on one problem only that is presented within one place, then it is presumably easier for the viewers to succumb to the illusion of the play as 'reality' or at least something that could occur 'like this' in real life.

Many authors, however, disrespected the unities or adhered to only some of them. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for example, ostensibly follows the rule of the unity of time (although it is entirely incredible that all the actions presented there could possibly take place within three hours as is stated in the text), and it adheres to some extent to the unity of place since everything takes place on Prospero's island (yet even there the characters are dispersed all over the island to different places so that no real unity is achieved). As far as the unity of plot is concerned, however, it becomes clear that there are a number of minor plots which combine to form the story of what happened to the King of Naples and his men after they were ship-wrecked on the island. While the overarching plot that holds everything together is Prospero's 'revenge' on his brother, undertaken with the help of the spirit, Ariel, other **subplots** emerge. Thus, there is the love story between Ferdinand and Miranda, Antonio's and Sebastian's plan to kill the king, and Caliban's plan to become master of the island. The alternation of scenes among the various subplots and places on the island contribute to a sense of fast movement and speedy action, which, in turn, makes the play more interesting to watch.

3.3.3. Freytag's Pyramid

Another model frequently used to describe the overall structure of plays is the so-called **Freytag's Pyramid**. In his book *Die Technik des Dramas* (*Technique of the Drama* 1863), the German journalist and writer, Gustav Freytag, described the classical five-act structure of plays in the shape of a pyramid, and he attributed a particular function to each of the five acts. Freytag's Pyramid can be schematised like this:

Key terms:
- Freytag's Pyramid
- exposition
- complicating action
- peripety
- falling action
- catastrophe
- dénouement

Freytag's Pyramid:
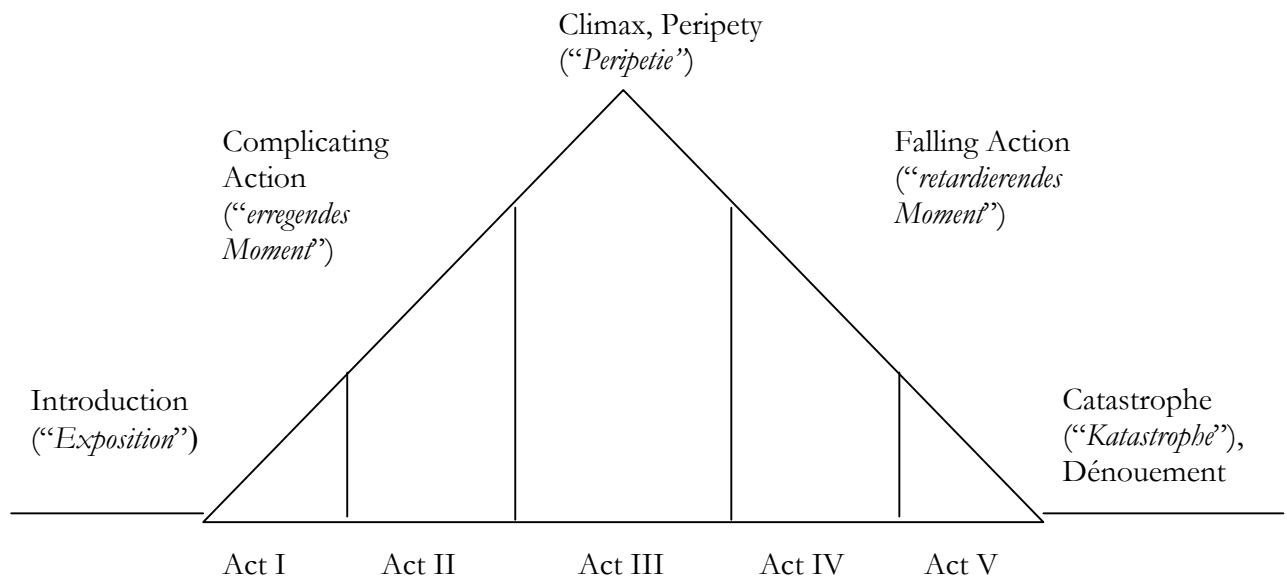
Act I contains all introductory information and thus serves as **exposition**: The main characters are introduced and, by presenting a conflict, the play prepares the audience for the action in subsequent acts. To illustrate this with an example: In the first act of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, the protagonist Hamlet is introduced and he is confronted with the ghost of his dead father, who informs him that King Claudius was responsible for his death. As a consequence, Hamlet swears vengeance and the scene is thus set for the following play.

The second act usually propels the plot by introducing further circumstances or problems related to the main issue. The main conflict starts to develop and characters are presented in greater detail. Thus, Hamlet wavers between taking action and his doubts concerning the apparition. The audience gets to know him as an introverted and melancholic character. In addition, Hamlet puts on "an antic disposition" (*Hamlet*, I, 5: 180), i.e., he pretends to be mad, in order to hide his plans from the king.

In act III, the plot reaches its climax. A crisis occurs where the deed is committed that will lead to the catastrophe, and this brings about a **turn** (peripety) in the plot. Hamlet, by organising a play performed at court, assures himself of the king's guilt. In a state of frenzy, he accidentally kills Polonius. The king realises the danger of the situation and decides to send Hamlet to England and to have him killed on his way there.

The fourth act creates new tension in that it delays the final catastrophe by further events. In *Hamlet*, the dramatic effect of the plot is reinforced by a number of incidents: Polonius' daughter, Ophelia, commits suicide and her brother, Laertes, swears vengeance against Hamlet. He and the king conspire to arrange a duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Having escaped his murderers, Hamlet returns to court.

The fifth act finally offers a solution to the conflict presented in the play. While tragedies end in a **catastrophe**, usually the death of the

protagonist, comedies are simply 'resolved' (traditionally in a wedding or another type of festivity). A term that is applicable to both types of ending is the French **dénouement**, which literally means the 'unknotting' of the plot. In the final duel, Hamlet is killed by Laertes but before that he stabs Laertes and wounds and poisons the king. The queen is poisoned by mistake when she drinks from a cup intended for Hamlet.

3.3.4. Open and Closed Drama

While traditional plays usually, albeit not exclusively, adhere to the five-act structure, modern plays have deliberately moved away from this rigid format, partly because it is considered too artificial and restrictive and partly because many contemporary playwrights generally do not believe in structure and order anymore (see **poststructuralism**, discussed in ch. 1.4.3.).

Another way to look at this is that traditional plays typically employ a **closed structure** while most contemporary plays are **open**. The terms 'open' and 'closed' drama go back to the German literary critic, Volker Klotz (1978), who distinguished between plays where the individual acts are tightly connected and logically built on one another, finally leading to a clear resolution of the plot (closed form), and plays where scenes only loosely hang together and are even exchangeable at times and where the ending does not really bring about any conclusive solution or result (compare also **open endings** and **closed endings** in narrative texts ch. 2.8.2.3.).

Open plays typically also neglect the concept of the **unities** and are thus rather free as far as their overall arrangement is concerned. An example is Samuel Beckett's famous play *Waiting for Godot*. Belonging to what is classified as the **theatre of the absurd**, this play is premised on the assumption that life is ultimately incomprehensible for mankind and that consequently all our actions are somewhat futile. The two main characters, the tramps Estragon and Vladimir, wait seemingly endlessly for the appearance of a person named Godot and meanwhile dispute the place and time of their appointment. While Estragon and Vladimir pass the time talking in an almost random manner, employing funny repartees and word-play, nothing really happens throughout the two acts of the play. Significantly, each of the acts ends with the announcement of Godot's imminent appearance and the two characters' decision to leave, and yet even then nothing happens as is indicated in the stage directions: "They do not move". The audience is left in a puzzled state because what is presented on stage does not really seem to make sense. There is no real plot in the sense of a sequence of causally motivated actions, and there is hardly any coherence. The play does not provide any information on preceding events that could be relevant, e.g., with regard to that mysterious Godot (Who is he? Why did Vladimir and Estragon make an appointment to see him?), and it does not offer a conclusive ending since the audience does not know what is going to happen (if anything) and what the actual point of this action is. Hence, there is no linear structure or logical sequence which leads to a closed ending but the play remains open and opaque on every imaginable level: plot, characters, their language, etc.

The fact that some authors adhere to certain **dramatic conventions** (see Poetics and Genre 1.4.2.), i.e. follow certain known practices and

traditions, and others do not, is obviously an interesting factor to consider in drama analysis since this may give us a clue to certain ideological or philosophical concepts or beliefs expressed in a play. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, enacts the absurdity of human existence. Just as the plot does not seem to move anywhere and the characters' actions or rather, inactivity, do not make sense, life comes across as purposeless and futile, and the audience's bewilderment in a way reflects mankind's bewilderment in view of an incomprehensible world. Plays with a closed structure, by contrast, present life as comprehensible and events as causally connected. Moreover, they suggest that problems are solvable and that there is a certain order in the world which needs to be re-established if lost.

The fact that in many plays all the 'baddies', for example, are punished in the end follows the principle of **poetic justice**, i.e., every character who committed a crime or who has become guilty in some way or another by breaking social or moral rules, has to suffer for this so that order can be reinstalled. Needless to say that life is not necessarily like this and yet, people often prefer closed endings since they give a feeling of satisfaction (just consider the way most mainstream movies are structured even today). If plays move away from the closed form, one then has to ask why they do it and one should also consider the possible effect of certain structures on the audience. Sometimes, for example, open forms with loosely linked scenes rather than a tightly plotted five-act structure are used to break up the illusion of the stage as life-world. Viewers are constantly made aware of the play being a performance and they are thus expected to have a more critical and distant look at what is presented to them. This can be found in Bertolt Brecht and other authors such as Edward Bond, John Arden and Howard Brenton.

3.4. Space

Space is an important element in drama since the stage itself also represents a space where action is presented. One must of course not forget that types of stage have changed in the history of the theatre and that this has also influenced the way plays were performed (see Types of Stage ch. 3.8.). The analysis of places and settings in plays can help one get a better feel for characters and their behaviour but also for the overall atmosphere. Plays can differ significantly with regard to how space is presented and how much information about space is offered. While in George Bernard Shaw's plays the secondary text provides detailed spatio-temporal descriptions, one finds hardly anything in the way of secondary text in Shakespeare (see Gurr and Ichikawa 2000).

The **stage set** quite literally 'sets the scene' for a play in that it already conveys a certain tone, e.g., one of desolation and poverty or mystery and secrecy. The fact that the description of the stage sets in the secondary text is sometimes very detailed and sometimes hardly worth mentioning is another crucial starting point for further analysis since that can tell us something about more general functions of settings.

Actual productions frequently invent their own set, independent of the information provided in a text. Thus, a very detailed set with lots of stage props may simply be used to show off theatrical equipment. In **Victorian melodrama** (see ch. 3.9.2.), for example, even horses were

Key terms:
- realism
- naturalism
- stage props
- word scenery
- symbolic space

brought on stage in order to make the 'show' more appealing but also to demonstrate a theatre's wealth and ability to provide expensive costumes, background paintings, etc. A more detailed stage set also aims at creating an illusion of **realism**, i.e., the scene presented on stage is meant to be as true-to-life as possible and the audience is expected to succumb to that illusion. At the same time, a detailed set draws attention to problems of an individual's milieu, for example, or background in general. This was particularly important in **naturalist writing**, which was premised on the idea that a person's character and behaviour are largely determined by his or her social context.

By contrast, if detail is missing in the presentation of the setting, whether in the text or in production, that obviously also has a reason. Sometimes, plays do not employ detailed settings because they do not aim at presenting an individualised, personal background but a general scenario that could be placed anywhere and affect anyone. The stage set in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, is really bare: "A country road. A tree". One can argue that this minimal set highlights the characters' uprootedness and underlines the play's focus on human existence in general.

3.4.1. Word Scenery

Since drama is multimedial, the visual aspect inevitably plays an important role. The layout/overall appearance of the set is usually described in stage directions or descriptions at the beginning of acts or scenes. Thus, all the necessary **stage props** (i.e., properties used on stage such as furniture, accessories, etc.) and possibly stage painting can be presented verbally in secondary texts, which is then translated into an actual visualisation on stage. One must not forget that directors are of course free to interpret secondary texts in different ways and thus to create innovative renditions of plays. An example is Richard Loncraine's 1996 film version of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, where the play is set in the 1930s.

The set or, more precisely, what it is supposed to represent, can also be conveyed in the characters' speech. In **Elizabethan times**, for example, where the set was rather bare with little stage props and no background scenery, the spatio-temporal framework of a scene had to be provided by characters' references to it. The jester Trinculo in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for example, gives the following description of the island and the weather:

> Here's neither bush nor shrub to bear off any weather at all, and
> another storm brewing; I hear it sing i' the wind. Yond same black
> cloud, yond huge one, looks like a foul bombard that would shed his
> liquor. If it should thunder as it did before I know not where to hide my
> head, yond same cloud cannot choose but fall by pailfuls.
> (*The Tempest*, II, 2: 19-23)

While Elizabethan theatre goers could not actually 'see' a cloud on stage, they were invited to imagine it in their mind's eye. The setting was thus created rhetorically as **word scenery** rather than by means of painted canvas, stage props and artificial lighting (which was not common practice until the **Restoration period**).

3.4.2. Setting and Characterisation

The setting can be used as a means of indirect characterisation. Thus, the anonymity and unloving atmosphere among the characters in Edward Bond's play *Saved* is anticipated by and mirrored in the barrenness of the stage set where only the most necessary pieces of furniture are presented but nothing that would give Pam's parents' flat a more personal touch. The characters in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, by comparison, are implicitly characterised as high society because they meet in coffee-houses, St. James' Park and posh private salons. A close look at the setting can thus contribute to a better understanding of the characters and their behaviour.

3.4.3. Symbolic Space

Another important factor to consider in this context is the interrelatedness of setting and plot. Obviously, the plot of a play is never presented in a vacuum but always against the background of a specific scenery and often the setting corresponds with what is going on in the storyworld. Thus, the storm at the beginning of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* not only starts off the play and functions as an effective background to the action but it also reflects the 'disorder' in which the characters find themselves at the beginning: Antonio unlawfully holds the position of his brother, Prospero; Sebastian is willing to get rid of his brother, King Alonso, in order to take his place; and the savage and deformed slave Caliban broods on revenge against his self-appointed master, Prospero. The lack of peace and order in the social world is thus analogous to chaos and destruction in the natural world. Likewise, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a storm signifies disorder when King Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan turn their father out of doors although they had vowed their affection for him and had received their share of the kingdom in return. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the secretive and highly sexual atmosphere is underlined by the dark forest at midnight, in which fog and darkness partly support but also thwart the characters' secret plans and actions. One can say that rather than only functioning as a background or creating a certain atmosphere, these spaces become **symbolic spaces** as they point towards other levels of meaning in the text. The setting can thus support the expression of the world view current at a certain time or general philosophical, ethical or moral questions.

So What?

Nowadays, theatres are equipped with all sorts of sets, props and technical machinery which allow for a wide range of audiovisual effects. When analysing plays, it is therefore worthwhile asking to what extent the plays actually make use of these devices and for what purpose. One important question one can ask, for example, is whether space is presented in detail or only in general terms. Consider the following introductory commentary from Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*:

> *The living-room of a two-room tenancy occupied by the Boyle family in a tenement house in Dublin. Left, a door leading to another part of the house; left of door a*

window looking into the street; at back a dresser; farther to right at back, a window looking into the back of the house. Between the window and the dresser is a picture of the Virgin; below the picture, on a bracket, is a crimson bowl in which a floating votive light is burning. Farther to the right is a small bed partly concealed by cretonne hangings strung on a twine. To the right is the fireplace; near the fireplace is a door leading to the other room. Beside the fireplace is a box containing coal. On the mantelshelf is an alarm clock lying on its face. In a corner near the window looking into the back is a galvanized bath. A table and some chairs. On the table are breakfast things for one. A teapot is on the hob and a frying-pan stands inside the fender. There are a few books on the dresser and one on the table. Leaning against the dresser is a long-handled shovel – the kind invariably used by labourers when turning concrete or mixing mortar. […]

What strikes one immediately is the minute precision with which the set is organised. Not only do we get a great number of even small stage props (picture, books, coal box, breakfast things, etc.) but their relative position to one another is also exactly described. If one considers that this is the very first scene the viewers see, it is almost as if they looked at a very detailed and realistic picture of a working-class home. The shovel indicates the social background of the people who live in the flat, and the fact that it is only a two-room flat points towards their relative poverty. The setting tells us even more about the family. Thus, we can conclude from the picture of the Virgin Mary and the floating votive light that this must be a religious family or at least a family which lives according to the Irish Catholic tradition. Furthermore, we identify a potential discrepancy when we look at the books. While the small number of books suggests on the one hand that the people who live there are not highly educated, the fact that there are books at all also indicates that at least someone in the family must be interested in reading. The text itself continues by explaining who that person is, Mary, and another member of the family, Johnny Boyle, is also introduced. We are even given information on Mary's inner conflict caused by her background on the one hand and her knowledge of literature on the other hand. Just as the first appearance of two of the characters blends in with a pictorial presentation of the setting, Mary and Johnny also seem to 'belong' to or be marked by that background. In other words: The naturalistic setting is used as indirect characterisation and defines the characters' conflicts or struggles.

Sometimes a bare stage indicates the play's focus on the characters' inner lives and consciousness, and technical devices and stage props are mainly used to emphasise or underline them. Consider the setting in Peter Shaffer's play *Equus*:

A square of wood set on a circle of wood.
The square resembles a railed boxing ring. The rail, also of wood, encloses three sides. It is perforated on each side by an opening. Under the rail are a few vertical slats, as if in a fence. On the downstage side there is no rail. The whole square is set on ball bearings, so that by slight pressure from actors standing round it on the circle, it can be made to turn round smoothly by hand.
On the square are set three little plain benches, also of wood. They are placed parallel with the rail, against the slats, but can be moved out by the actors to stand at right angles to them.

Set into the floor of the square, and flush with it, is a thin metal pole, about a yard high. This can be raised out of the floor, to stand upright. It acts as a support for the actor playing Nugget, when he is ridden.

In the area outside the circle stand benches. Two downstage left and right are curved to accord with the circle. The left one is used by Dysart as a listening and observing post when he is out of the square, and also by Alan as his hospital bed. The right one is used by Alan's parents, who sit side by side on it. (Viewpoint is from the main body of the audience.)

Further benches stand upstage, and accommodate the other actors. All the cast of Equus sits on stage the entire evening. They get up to perform their scenes, and return when they are done to their places around the set. They are witnesses, assistants – and especially a Chorus.

Upstage, forming a backdrop to the whole, are tiers of seats in the fashion of a dissecting theatre, formed into two railed-off blocks, pierced by a central tunnel. In these blocks sit members of the audience. During the play, Dysart addresses them directly from time to time, as he addresses the main body of the theatre. No other actor ever refers to them.

To left and right, downstage, stand two ladders on which are suspended horse masks. The colour of all benches is olive green.

What strikes one immediately when looking at this stage set is that it does not even try to be realistic. Whether scenes take place in Dysart's practice, in Alan's home or in the stables, there is no furniture or other stage props to indicate this. The horses are played by actors who simply put on horse masks but this is done on stage so that the audience is reminded of the fact that it is watching a play. The alternation of scenes is marked by the usage of different parts of the stage (upstairs, downstairs) and time shifts become noticeable through changing lights. The stage seems to be arranged like this intentionally and one can ask why. First and foremost, the set lacks detail so that attention can be drawn to the performance of the actors. Secondly, what the actors perform is thus also moved to the centre, namely Alan's psychological development, his consciousness and memories. Put another way, the focus is on mental processes rather than on social factors (although they of course influence Alan's development and are thus also brought on stage, albeit symbolically and rhetorically rather than realistically).

Whatever explanation one comes up with, the first step is to note that the stage and the represented setting usually have a purpose and one then has to ask how they correlate with what is presented in the actual text, to what extent they express concepts and ideas, etc.

3.5. Time

Time in drama can be considered from a variety of angles. One can, for example, look at time as part of the play: How are references to time made in the characters' speech, the setting, stage directions, etc.? What is the overall time span of the story? On the other hand, time is also a crucial factor in the performance of a play: How long does the performance actually take? Needless to say that the audiences' perception of time can also vary. Another question one can ask in this context is: Which general concepts of time are expressed in and by a play?

3.5.1. Succession and Simultaneity

One of the first distinctions one can make is the one between **succession** and **simultaneity**. Events and actions can take place in one of two ways: either one after another (successively) or all at the same time (simultaneously). When these events are performed on stage, their presentation in scenes will inevitably be successive while they may well be simultaneous according to the internal time frame of the play.

Consider, for example, the plot of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Given the fact that the plot is supposed to last only three hours, one must presume that the various subplots presenting the different groups of people dispersed over the island must take place roughly at the same time: e.g., Caliban's encounter with Trinculo and Stephano in Act II, scene 1 and continued in III, 2 is likely to take place at the same time as Miranda's and Ferdinand's conversation in III, 1, etc. A sense of simultaneity is created here exactly because different **plot-lines** alternate in strings of immediately successive scenes. On the other hand, if no other indication of divergent time frames is given in the text, viewers normally automatically assume that the events and actions presented in subsequent scenes are also successive in their temporal order.

3.5.2. Presentation of Temporal Frames

There are a number of possibilities to create a **temporal frame** in drama. Allusions to time can be made in the characters' conversations; the exact time of a scene can be provided in the stage directions; or certain stage props like clocks and calendars or auditory devices such as church bells ringing in the background can give the audience a clue about what time it is. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, for example, when the guards see the ghost of Hamlet's father, the time is given in the guard's account of the same apparition during the previous night:

> Last night of all,
> When yond same star that's westward from the pole,
> Had made his course t'illume that part of heaven
> Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
> The bell then beating one –
> (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, 1: 38-42)

While in this instance, the exact time is expressed verbally by one of the characters, the crowing of a cock offstage indicates the approaching daylight later in that scene and causes the apparition to disappear. In scene 4 of the same act, Hamlet himself is on guard in order to meet the ghost, and the scene begins with the following short exchange between Hamlet and Horatio:

> *Ham.* The air bites shrewdly, it is very cold.
> *Hor.* It is a nipping and an eager air.
> *Ham.* What hour now?
> *Hor.*   I think it lacks of twelve.
> (*Hamlet*, I, 4: 1-4)

This short dialogue not only conveys to the audience the time of night but it also uses **word painting** to describe the weather conditions and the overall atmosphere ("air bites", "very cold", "nipping"). Word painting means that actors describe the scenery vividly and thus create or 'paint' a picture in the viewers' minds.

The third possibility of presenting time in the stage directions is used in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, for example. The introductory author commentary to each of the three acts in the secondary text gives very short instructions concerning the time of the subsequent scenes: "Early evening. April" (I, 1), "Two weeks later. Evening" (II,1), "The following evening" (II, 2), "Several months later. A Sunday evening" (III, 1), "It is a few minutes later" (III, 2). While a reading audience is thus fully informed about the timing of the scenes, theatre goers have to infer it from the context created through the characters' interactions. The temporal gap between acts two and three, for example, has to be inferred from the fact that things have changed in Jimmy's and Alison's flat after Alison left, most noticeably that Helena has taken up Alison's place and is now the woman in the house.

3.5.3. Story Time and Discourse Time

3.5.3.1. Duration

Another important distinction one needs to be made when analysing time in drama, namely between fictive story time or **played time** and real **playing time** (see also story time and discourse time for narrative ch. 2.8.2.). While the **played time** or the time of the story in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* encompasses several months, the play's actual **playing time** (time it takes to stage the play) is approximately two hours. The playing time of a piece of drama of course always depends on the speed at which actors perform individual scenes and can thus vary significantly from one performance to another.

The fact that story time elapses from one scene to the next and from act to act is indicated by the fall of the curtain in Osborne's play. Thus, quick curtains are used between scenes, while longer curtain pauses occur between acts. Significantly, the length of curtain time is correlated with the length of time that has been left out in the story: A quick curtain suggests a short time span while normal breaks cover longer time spans of the played time.

A gaps in the played time of a piece of drama is called **ellipsis**, i.e., one leaves out bits of the story and thus speeds up the plot. Considering that scenes usually present actions directly, one can assume that played time and playing time usually coincide in drama. In other words: If characters are presented talking to one another for, say, twenty minutes, then it will normally take about twenty minutes for actors to perform this 'conversation'. Discrepancies between the duration of played time and playing time mostly concur with scenic breaks because it is difficult to present them convincingly in the middle of an interaction. However, an example of a **speed-up** or **summary**, i.e., a situation where the actual playing time is shorter than the time span presented in the played

Key terms:
- played time
- playing time
- duration
- ellipsis
- speed-up / summary
- slow-down / stretch
- pause

interaction, can be found for instance in Thomas Middleton's and William Rowley's *The Changeling*. Beatrice, who fears that her lack of sexual innocence could be discovered by her husband during their wedding night, has arranged for her maid to take her place in the wedding bed and anxiously awaits the maid's return:

> *Enter* Beatrice. *A clock strikes one.*
> BEATRICE: One struck, and yet she lies by't – oh my fears!
>   This strumpet serves her own ends, 'tis apparent now,
>   Devours the pleasure with a greedy appetite
>   And never minds my honour or my peace,
>   Makes havoc of my right; but she pays dearly for't:
>   No trusting of her life with such a secret,
>   That cannot rule her blood to keep her promise.
>   Beside, I have some suspicion of her faith to me
>   Because I was suspected of my lord,
>   And it must come from her. – Hark by my horrors!
>   Another clock strikes two.
>   [*Strikes two.*]
>   (*The Changeling*, V, 1: 1-12)

A few lines further down, after a brief dialogue with De Flores, Beatrice mentions the clock again: "List, oh my terrors! / Three struck by Saint Sebastian's!" (ibid, 66f). Although the time it takes for Beatrice to appear on stage and to wait for her maid can hardly be longer than ten minutes in actual performance, the time that elapses in the story is two hours. The lapse of time is indicated in Beatrice's speech as well as by the sound of a clock offstage but this seems very artificial because Beatrice appears before the audience for a much shorter time. The discrepancy between played time and playing time is particularly conspicuous at the very beginning of this scene, where Beatrice announces the striking of the next hour after only a couple of minutes on stage. This scene clearly does not put an emphasis on a realistic rendition of time but the focus is on Beatrice's reaction to the maid's late arrival and her anxiousness lest her trick should be discovered.

Since drama employs other media than narrative texts and is performed in real time, not all usages of time in narrative are possible in plays (compare ch. 2.8.). Nevertheless, postmodernist plays in particular sometimes experiment with different presentations of time. Techniques which can only be adopted in modified form in drama are **slow-down** or **stretch**, where the playing time is longer than the played time, and **pause**, where the play continues while the story stops. One might argue that **soliloquies** where characters discuss and reveal their inner psychological state or emotions are similar to pauses since no real 'action' is observable and the development of the story is put on hold, so to speak. However, if one considers that the character's talking to the audience or perhaps to himself is in a way also a form of action that can be relevant for further actions, this argument does not really hold. Consider the following example from Peter Shaffer's *Equus*. The psychologist Dysart in a way steps out of the story-world of the play and addresses the audience:

> Now he's gone off to rest, leaving me alone with Equus. I can hear the creature's voice. It's calling me out of the black cave of the Psyche. I

shove in my dim little torch, and there he stands – waiting for me. He raises his matted head. He opens his great square teeth, and says – [*Mocking.*] '*Why?* ... Why Me? … Why – ultimately – Me? … Do you really imagine you can account for Me? … Poor Doctor Dysart!'

  [*He enters the square.*]

Of course I've stared at such images before. Or been stared at by them, whichever way you look at it. And weirdly often now with me the feeling is that *they* are staring at *us* – that in some quite palpable way they precede us. Meaningless but unsettling … In either case, this one is alarming yet. It asks questions I've avoided all my professional life. [*Pause.*] A child is born into a world of phenomena all equal in their power to enslave. It sniffs – it sucks – it strokes its eyes over the whole uncomfortable range. Suddenly one strikes. Why? Moments snap together like magnets, forging a chain of shackles. Why? I can trace them. I can even, with time, pull them apart again. But why at the start they were ever magnetized at all – just those particular moments of experience and no others – I don't know. *And nor does anyone else.* Yet *if* I don't know – if I can never know that – then what am I doing here? I don't mean clinically doing or socially doing – I mean fundamentally! These questions, these Whys, are fundamental – yet they have no place in a consulting room. So then, do I? …This is the feeling more and more with me – No Place. Displacement … 'Account for me,' says staring Equus. 'First account for Me! …' I fancy this is more than menopause.

(*Equus*, II, 22)

One could argue that, while Dysart reflects on his feelings about his work, the story as such stops. However, if one considers Dysart's inner development as a psychiatrist, another vital part of the plot, and treats this address to the audience as an integral element of the play's communication system, then the playing time of Dysart's speech still coincides with its played time. In other words: even where narrative elements are used in plays and thus potentially facilitate narrative techniques of time presentation, the overall scenic structure almost always counters that.

  A stretch or slow-down could be realised if characters were to act in slow-motion, e.g., in a pantomime or dumb show, similar to slow-motion techniques in films. This, however, is not feasible for an entire play. Manfred Pfister mentions in his book *Das Drama* (1997: 363) J.B. Priestley's play *Time and the Conways*, where the entire second act is used to present Kay's daydream, which, according to time references in the play, only lasts for a few minutes. This slow-down is of course only recognisable through overt hints in the surrounding plot, whereas the time of the actions presented within the daydream perfectly corresponds with the time it takes to perform them on stage. So, again, a real slow-down cannot actually be achieved through the way the performance is acted out since actors cannot really 'slow down' their acting (unless they play in slow motion) but it can be suggested by means of linguistic cues or stage props indicating time (clocks, etc.).

3.5.3.2. Order

Another aspect to look at when analysing time in drama (as well as narrative) is the concept of **order** (see also Prose ch. 2.8.2.2.). How are events ordered temporally? Does the temporal sequence of scenes correspond with the temporal order of events and actions in the presented story? Like narrative, drama can make use of **flashback** (**analepsis**) and **flashforward** (**prolepsis**). In flashbacks, events from the past are mingled with the presentation of current events, while in flashforwards, future events are anticipated. While flashforwards are not as common since they potentially threaten the build-up of the audience's suspense (if we already know what is going to happen, we can at best wonder how this ending is brought about), flashbacks are frequently used in order to illustrate a character's memories or to explain the outcome of certain actions.

An example for a flashforward is the prologue in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where the audience is already told the gist of the subsequent play. Examples of flashbacks can be found in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, where the unemployed and desolate salesman Willy Loman remembers his happy family life in the past. Flashbacks also occur frequently in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, where they represent Alan's recollections of the events that led up to his blinding of the horses. *Equus* is interesting in that a linear presentation of Alan's therapy is juxtaposed with a non-linear presentation of the story of his outrageous deed. Thus, the play's play with order and chronology invites the audience to view more critically conventional notions of cause and effect, which is one of the crucial themes of the play, e.g., when Dysart doubts his ability ever to get to the heart of a strange obsession like Alan's.

Three terms which are often used in the context of discussions of chronology and order are the three basic types of beginnings: **ab ovo**, **in medias res** and **in ultimas res**. These terms refer to the point of time of a story at which a play sets in and they are thus closely related to the amount of information viewers are offered at the beginning of a play:

- ab ovo: the play starts at the beginning of the story and provides all the necessary background information concerning the characters, their circumstances, conflicts, etc. (**exposition**)
- in medias res: the story starts somewhere in the middle and leaves the viewer puzzled at first
- in ultimas res: the story begins with its actual outcome or ending and then relates events in reverse order, thus drawing the audience's attention on the 'how' rather than the 'what' of the story. Plays which use this method are called **analytic plays**.

While in narrative analysis, the terms ab ovo and in medias res are also used to distinguish between beginnings where the reader is introduced to the plot by means of preliminary information mostly conveyed by the narrator (ab ovo) and beginnings where the reader is simply thrust into the action of the narrative (in medias res, see also Prose ch. 2.8.2.3.), plays by definition always already present the viewer with some action unless there is a narrative-like mediator (chorus, commentator, etc.). Since in that sense plays are usually always in medias res because they present viewers directly with an interaction among characters, it might be more appropriate to use the

more narrow definition given above for drama, which is limited to the timing of beginnings and does not focus so much on the mode of presentation.

3.5.3.3. Frequency

Another facet of time worth analysing is the concept of frequency, i.e., how often an event is presented. Although the categories proposed by Genette for narrative texts are not directly applicable to drama, one can nevertheless identify similar structures. According to Genette, there are three possible types of reference to an event (see Genette 1980):

- **singulative**: an event takes place once and is referred to once
- **repetitive**: an event takes place once but is referred to or presented repeatedly
- **iterative**: an event takes place several times but is referred to in the text only once

The **singulative** representation of events can be found whenever scenes in a play contain single actions and these actions are represented once. This mode is mostly found in linear plots where the main aim is to delineate the development of a conflict. Traditional plays usually adopt this mode. Thus, Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for example, presents its plot in fast-moving actions where no scene replicates previous scenes.

     Iterative telling occurs when characters refer to the same or similar events that have already happened. The guards in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, discuss during their night shift what had happened during the previous night and thus the apparition of the ghost is presented as repetitive action.

     An **repetitive** representation of events is more difficult to imagine in drama since, strictly speaking, it would involve the same scene to be played several times in exactly the same way. While a complete overlap of scenes is not feasible as it would probably cause boredom, especially modern plays frequently make use of the repetition of similar events/interactions or parts of dialogues. A good example is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where Vladimir and Estragon repeat actions and verbal exchanges throughout the play and where, most significantly, the two acts are structured in parallel, culminating in the announcement of the imminent appearance of Godot (who never shows up) and Vladimir's and Estragon's inaction. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* employs a similar strategy by presenting the first and the third act in a similar fashion, the only difference being that Alison has been replaced by Helena. This repetition of events (Helena standing there in Jim's shirt, ironing clothes, and Jim and Cliff sitting in their arm-chairs) is obviously used to suggest that there is no real change or development in Jim's own life despite the fact that he constantly rages against the establishment and against other people's passivity.

SO WHAT?

As with the presentation of space, aspects of time are rarely presented for their own sake but often imply further levels of meaning that might help one interpret a text. Thus, time can also be symbolic and stand for larger concepts. For example, *Waiting for Godot*'s modified version of iterative action creates a sense of stagnation and lack of movement, which corresponds with the more philosophical notion of people's helplessness and the purposelessness of life in general. *Look Back in Anger*, in a similar vein, illustrates a cyclical notion of time and history whereby events recur again and again. This ultimately also generates a sense of stagnation and, in this particular case, underlines the protagonist's lack of action. By contrast, plays where the overall order is chronological and where the plot moves through singulative representation of actions to a final conclusion suggest progress and development and thus perhaps also a more positive and optimistic image of mankind and history.

Different uses of time are of course also important for the creation of certain effects on the audience. While non-chronological plots, for example, can be confusing, they may also create suspense or challenge the viewer's ability to make connections between events. Furthermore, plays which present a story in its chronological order draw attention to the final outcome and thus are based on the question: 'What happens next?', whereas plays with a non-chronological order, which might even anticipate the ending, focus on the question: 'How does everything happen?'

Detailed time presentations or, by contrast, a lack of detail may point towards the importance or insignificance of time for a specific storyline. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, the timing of the scenes that take place in the forest during the night remains rather fuzzy, thus underlining the characters' changed sense of time and also the timelessness of the fairy-world presented there.

3.6. Characters

3.6.1. Major and Minor Characters

Since drama presents us directly with scenes which are based on people's actions and interactions, characters play a dominant role in this genre and therefore deserve close attention. The characters in plays can generally be divided into **major characters** and **minor characters**, depending on how important they are for the plot. A good indicator as to whether a character is major or minor is the amount of time and speech as well as presence on stage he or she is allocated.

As a rule of thumb, major characters usually have a lot to say and appear frequently throughout the play, while minor characters have less presence or appear only marginally. Thus, for example, Hamlet is clearly the main character or **protagonist** of Shakespeare's famous tragedy as we can infer from the fact that he appears in most scenes and is allocated a great number of speeches and, what is more, since even his name appears in the title (he is the **eponymous hero**). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, by contrast, are only minor characters because they are not as vitally important for the plot and therefore appear only for a short period of time. However,

they become major characters in Tom Stoppard's comical re-make of the play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), where the two attendants are presented as bewildered witnesses and predestined victims.

Occasionally even virtually non-existent characters may be important but this scenario is rather exceptional. An example can be found in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where the action centres around the arrival of the mysterious Godot, whose name even appears in the title of the play although he never actually materialises on stage.

3.6.2. Character Complexity

Major characters are frequently, albeit not exclusively, **multi-dimensional** and **dynamic** (**round** character) while minor characters often remain **mono-dimensional** and **static** (**flat** character, see Character Dimensions in narrative prose). Multi-dimensional characters display several (even conflicting) character traits and are thus reasonably complex. They also tend to develop throughout the plot (hence, dynamic), though this is not necessarily the case. Hamlet, for example, is marked by great intellectual and rhetorical power but he is also flawed to the extent that he is indecisive and passive. The audience learns a lot about his inner moral conflict, his wavering between whether to take revenge or not, and we see him in different roles displaying different qualities: as prince and statesman, as son, as Ophelia's admirer, etc.

Mono-dimensional characters, on the other hand, can usually be summarised by a single phrase or statement, i.e., they have only few character traits and are generally merely **types** (see also ch. 2.4.3.). Frequently, mono-dimensional characters are also static, i.e., they do not develop or change during the play. Laertes, Ophelia's brother, for example, is not as complex as Hamlet. He can be described as a passionate, rash youth who does not hesitate to take revenge when he hears about his father's and sister's deaths. As a character, he corresponds to the conventional **revenger type**, and part of the reason why he does not come across as a complex figure is that we hardly get to know him. In the play, Laertes functions as a **foil** for Hamlet since Hamlet's indecisiveness and thoughtfulness appear as more marked through the contrast between the two young men.

3.6.3. Character and Genre Conventions

Sometimes the quality of characters can also depend on the subgenre to which a play belongs because genres traditionally follow certain conventions even as far as the **dramatis personae**, i.e., the dramatic personnel, are concerned. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, characters in tragedies have to be of a high social rank so that their downfall in the end can be more tragic (the higher they are, the lower they fall), while comedies typically employ 'lower' characters who need not be taken so seriously and can thus be made fun of. Since tragedies deal with difficult conflicts and subject matters, tragic heroes are usually complex. According to Aristotle, they are supposed to be neither too good nor too bad but somewhere 'in the middle' (Aristotle, 1953: 1453a), which allows them to have some tragic 'flaw' (**hamartia**) that

ultimately causes their downfall. Since tragic heroes have almost 'average' characteristics and inner conflicts, the audience can identify more easily with them, which is an important prerequisite for what Aristotle calls the effect of **catharsis** (literally, a 'cleansing' of one's feelings), i.e., the fact that one can suffer with the hero, feel **pity** and **fear**, and through this strong emotional involvement clarify one's own state of mind and potentially become a better human being (Aristotle 1953: 1450a, see Zapf 1991: 30-40 for a more detailed exploration of Aristotle's concept). Comedies, by contrast, deal with problems in a lighter manner and therefore do not necessarily require complex figures. Furthermore, types are more appropriate in comedies as their single qualities can be easily exaggerated and thus subverted into laughable behaviour and actions. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, the weaver Bottom, who foolishly thinks he can be a great actor, is literally turned into an ass and thus becomes the laughingstock of the play.

3.6.4. Contrast and Correspondences

Characters in plays can often be classified by way of **contrast** or **correspondences**. In Middleton's and Rowley's *The Changeling*, for example, the characters in the main plot and the ones of the subplot are exposed to similar conflicts and problems and thus correspond with one another on certain levels, while their reactions are very different and thus show the contrasts between corresponding figures. Beatrice, the protagonist of the main plot, and Isabella, Alibius' wife in the subplot, are both restricted by their social positions as wives and daughters. However, while Beatrice oversteps the boundaries by having her suitor, Alonzo, killed in order to be able to marry Alsemero, Isabella fulfils her role as faithful wife and does not break the rules even when two suitors make advances to her. The themes of sexuality and adultery play an important role in both plots, yet they are pursued in different ways. While Beatrice commits adultery, albeit somewhat involuntarily at first, Isabella resists the temptation and remains virtuous. Sexuality is discussed with subterfuge and only implicitly in the main plot and yet sexual encounters take place, whereas the same topic is discussed in an open and bawdy manner in the subplot where ultimately nothing happens.

The husbands in the two plot-lines can also be described in terms of contrasts and correspondences. While Alsemero trusts his wife and does not see what is really going on between her and De Flores (it is only through hints by his friend that he starts to feel suspicious), Alibius is highly suspicious of Isabella and for this reason does not allow her to receive any visitors during his absence. Ironically, as the plot-lines unfold we learn that Alibius' suspicions are groundless since Isabella remains firm and faithful, whereas Beatrice in a sense cheats on her husband even before they are married.

By presenting corresponding characters in such a contrastive manner, their individual characteristics are thrown into sharper relief and certain qualities are highlighted with regard to the overall plot. We can say that the characters in the subplot of *The Changeling* function as **foils** to the characters in the main plot because they bring out more effectively the main

characters' features (a foil is a piece of shiny metal put under gemstones to increase their brightness).

3.6.5. Character Constellations

Characters can also be classified according to their membership to certain groups of characters both across the entire play as well as in individual scenes. In other words, questions like 'Who belongs to whom?' and 'Which characters are friends or foes?' are also essential in drama analysis. If one considers the overall structure of the play and groups of characters therein, one deals with the **constellation** of the dramatic personnel. Constellations can be based on sympathies and antipathies among characters, on how they act and react to one another, etc. Usually, one can make the distinction between **heroes** and their enemies or **protagonists** and **antagonists**, and one can find characters who collaborate and support one another, while others fight or plot against each other. Obviously, character constellation is a dynamic concept since sympathies/antipathies can change and groups of people can also change. On stage, groups can be presented symbolically by certain distinctive stage props or costumes and also through their gestures and relative spatial position to one another. In the following picture from a lay performance of Sharman MacDonald's *After Juliet*, the opposing members of the Houses of Capulet and Montague can be identified by the fact that they appear in differently coloured spotlights (green and red respectively), and by their final positioning in the play, which already marks their newly aroused antagonism: They have picked up their swords and face one another, ready for a new fight.
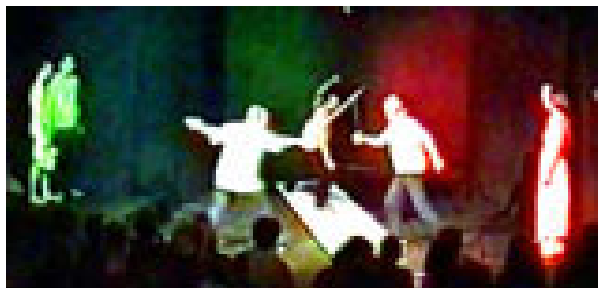
3.6.6. Character Configurations

In contrast to character constellation, the term **configuration** denotes the sequential presentation of different characters together on stage. Configurations thus change whenever characters exit or enter the stage. In the first scene of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for example, Richard appears on stage alone first, followed by the entrance of his brother Clarence and Brakenbury with a guard of men, after whose exit Richard is on his own again before Lord Hastings joins him. Before the first scene closes, Lord Hastings exits and Richard remains once again alone on stage.

Configurations typically underlie the overall structure of scenes but, as the example of *Richard III* shows, configurations can even change within scenes. Configurations are important to the extent that they show up groups

and developments among groups of characters, which, in turn, is essential for the development of the plot. In *Richard III*, Richard's frequent appearances alone on stage already reveal him as a loner and an outsider but also as a cunning schemer, whose interactions with other characters are thus unravelled to be false and underhanded.

3.6.7. Techniques of Characterisation

Characters in drama are characterised using various techniques of characterisation. Generally speaking, one can distinguish between characterisations made by the author in the play's secondary text (**authorial**) or by characters in the play (**figural**), and whether these characterisations are made directly (**explicitly**) or indirectly (**implicitly**). Another distinction can be made between **self-characterisation** and characterisation through others (see also characterisation techniques in narrative prose ch. 2.4.1.). The way these different forms of characterisation can be accomplished in plays can be schematised as follows:

Key terms:
- authorial characterisation
- figural characterisation
- self-characterisation
- dialect
- sociolect
- telling name

	authorial	figural
explicit	descriptions of characters in author commentary or stage directions; telling names	characters' descriptions of and comments on other characters; also self-characterisation
implicit	correspondences and contrasts; indirectly characterising names	physical appearance, gesture and facial expressions (body language); masks and costumes; stage props, setting; behaviour; voice; language (style, register, dialect, etc.); topics one discusses

Of course, the characterisation of figures usually works on several levels and combines a number of these techniques.

An example of an explicit authorial characterisation can be found in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, where the author provides a detailed description of Jimmy in the introductory secondary text:

- JIMMY is a tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a very worn tweed jacket and flannels. Clouds of smoke fill the room from the pipe he is smoking. He is a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike. Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loud-mouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal. (Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*)

Since this explicit authorial characterisation is obviously not available for viewers in a theatre, Jimmy has to be characterised implicitly through the audio-visual channel, i.e., in his interactions with the other characters, the things he talks about, the way he talks, etc. One means of indirect characterisation is already provided in Jimmy's physical appearance. The fact that he contrasts sharply with Cliff (tall and slender versus short and big boned) suggests to the audience that he might be different in terms of personality as well. The two men's divergent characters are most visible in the way they interact, however, and in their respective behaviour towards Jimmy's wife, Alison:

JIMMY   Why do I do this every Sunday? Even the book reviews seem to be the same as last week's. Different books – same reviews. Have you finished that one yet?
CLIFF   Not yet.
JIMMY   I've just read three whole columns on the English Novel. Half of it's in French. Do the Sunday papers make *you* feel ignorant?
CLIFF   Not 'arf.
JIMMY   Well, you are ignorant. You're just a peasant. [*To Alison.*] What about you? You're not a peasant are you?
ALISON   [*absently.*] What's that?
JIMMY   I said do the papers make you feel you're not so brilliant after all?
ALISON   Oh – I haven't read them yet.
JIMMY   I didn't ask you that. I said –
CLIFF   Leave the poor girlie alone. She's busy.
JIMMY   Well, she can talk, can't she? You can talk, can't you? You can express an opinion. Or does the White Woman's Burden make it impossible to think?
ALISON   I'm sorry. I wasn't listening properly.
JIMMY   You bet you weren't listening. Old Porter talks, and everyone turns over and goes to sleep. And Mrs. Porter gets 'em all going with the first yawn.
CLIFF   Leave her alone I said.
JIMMY   [*shouting*]. All right, dear. Go back to sleep. It was only me talking. You know? Talking? Remember? I'm sorry.
CLIFF   Stop yelling. I'm trying to read.
JIMMY   Why do you bother? You can't understand a word of it.
CLIFF   Uh huh.
JIMMY   You're too ignorant.
CLIFF   Yes, and uneducated. Now shut up, will you? (ibid.)

In this introductory scene the audience already forms an impression of Jimmy as an almost unbearable, angry, young man because he insults his friend and tries to provoke his wife by making derogatory comments about her parents. The fact that he even starts shouting at Alison shows his ill-temper and that he generally seems to be badly-behaved. By contrast, Cliff tries to ignore Jimmy's attacks as far as possible in order to avoid further conflicts, and he protects Alison. While Jimmy criticises and humiliates his wife, Cliff shows through his words and gestures that he cares for her. Thus, he asks her to stop ironing and to relax from her household chores:

CLIFF   [...] [*Puts out his hand to Alison.*] How are you, dullin'?
ALISON   All right thank you, dear.
CLIFF   [*grasping her hand*]. Why don't you leave all that, and sit down for a bit? You look tired.
ALISON   [*smiling*]. I haven't much more to do.
CLIFF   [*kisses her hand, and puts her fingers in his mouth*]. She's a beautiful girl, isn't she?

His gestures and body language show Cliff as an openly affectionate character. This character trait, which is conveyed in an implicit figural technique of characterisation here, again contrasts with Jimmy's behaviour and thus brings Jimmy's lack of loving kindness into sharper relief.

The outward appearance of characters is often used as an implicit means of characterisation. **Melodramatic plays**, for example, generally present the 'goodies' as fair and good-looking, while 'baddies' are of dark complexion, wearing moustaches, etc.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, this device is also used for the characterisation of Caliban. Caliban is an extremely ugly creature, which already signifies the evil traits in his character. Furthermore, Caliban's language reveals him as ambiguous. While he speaks verse and is generally a capable rhetorician, his speech is also marked by frequent swearing, insults, vulgar and ungrammatical expressions. Thus he says to Prospero: "All the charms/ Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!" (*The Tempest*, I, 2: 398f) and later: "You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!" (ibid: 424-426). Caliban's evil character traits are also implicitly revealed to the audience when Prospero relates how Caliban tried to rape his daughter, Miranda, and when Caliban tries to inveigle Stephano and Trinculo into usurping the island. This example shows that dramatic figures can be characterised in a number of ways and that the audience is usually given several signals or cues concerning the personality of characters: gesture, behaviour, looks, etc.

Dramatic language is another important means of indirect characterisation in plays. Characters are presented to the audience through what they say and how they say it, their verbal interactions with others and the discrepancies between their talk and their actions. In an actual performance, an actor's voice and tone thus also play a major role for how the audience perceives the played character. This can also be seen in plays where **dialect** or specific **sociolects** are used. Dialect indicates what region or geographical area one comes from, while sociolect refers to linguistic features which give away one's social status and membership in a social group. An example is Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* where the characters speak with a broad Irish accent and use a lot of local **colloquialisms** (even the title already employs accent: 'paycock' instead of 'peacock'). Their language immediately categorises the characters as members of a lower social class and it also underlines one of the major themes of the play: patriotism.

Sometimes, character traits can already be anticipated by a character's name. So-called **telling names**, for example, explicitly state the quality of a character (e.g., figures like Vice, Good-Deeds, Everyman, Knowledge, Beauty, etc. in the Medieval **morality plays**), or they refer to

characters' typical behaviour. Thus, some of the characters in Congreve's *The Way of the World* are identified as specific types through their names: Fainall = 'feigns all', Mirabell = 'admirable' and also 'admirer of female beauty', Witwoud = 'would be witty', and Millamant = 'has a thousand lovers'.

SO WHAT?

Characters represent one of the most important analytical categories in drama since they carry the plot. In other words: there cannot be a play without characters. Characters' interactions trigger and move the plot, and their various relationships to one another form the basis for conflicts and dynamic processes. A lot of the terms used for techniques of characterisation in narrative are also applicable in drama but one needs to be aware of fundamental differences related to the different medium. When we read a novel, for example, the narrator often describes characters which we then have to imagine and bring to life in our mind's eye. While this exists in drama to the extent that we often find stage directions or introductory comments in the secondary text, characters in actual performances are always already interpretations of stage directors and actors who bring characters to life for us. Our view of characters in staged plays is thus inevitably influenced by the way an actor looks, how he speaks, how he acts out his role, etc. Other influential factors can be costumes and make-up, the overall setting in which a character is presented, etc.

Consider in what ways the different realisations of Hamlet in the following pictures can potentially change the viewers' attitudes towards the character:

[Photo1: Laurence Olivier as Hamlet after he killed Polonius]

The first photo shows Hamlet played by Laurence Olivier in the 1948 film version of the play (photo from Dent (1948) found on http://www.murphsplace.com/olivier/hamlet2.html) [Dent, Alan (1948). *Hamlet – The Film and the Play.* London: World Film Publications.]. The costume and the set in general try to render the scene as authentically as possible, i.e., this production aims at a realistic presentation of the play. Hamlet is dressed in traditional costume, a courtly outfit which displays his social rank and dignity. He wears a highly ornate doublet, jewellery and stockings as would befit a mighty prince. His posture is upright, only his head stoops slightly towards Polonius who lies dead at Hamlet's feet.

Hamlet's facial expression is serious and his eyes are fixed on the dead body. This expression suits the tragic circumstances of Polonius' death, but it also underlines Hamlet's shock when he discovers that it was not the king he killed but Polonius. Hamlet's face does not display sadness, however. It is as though Hamlet was wearing a mask behind which he hides his emotions. He seems to perceive Polonius' death as an unfortunate, but inevitable, event imposed on him by fate. At the same time, Hamlet's facial expression reveals his serious and melancholic character. Generally speaking, one can say that Hamlet's character appears as dignified through the princely costume and Olivier's body language.

[Photo 2: Pyjama Hamlet with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern]

The second photo shows a modern version of *Hamlet* ("Shakespeare in Performance", photo by Joe Cocks Studio, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1989, found on http://www.geocities.com/markaround/html/stagepics.htm). In the scene depicted here, Hamlet talks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. While the two attendants are dressed in formal contemporary suits, Hamlet is wearing pyjamas. Hamlet's outfit, which is not normally acceptable in public because it belongs to people's private and even intimate spheres, already signals to the audience that something must be wrong with him. In a way, Hamlet's madness is epitomised by his inappropriate and somewhat slovenly dress. This interpretation takes into account and even surpasses the original text where Ophelia also comments on Hamlet's changed appearance: "with his doublet all unbrac'd,/ No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,/ Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle" (*Hamlet*, II, 1: 78-80). In addition to the 'costume', Hamlet's facial expression represents 'madness', yet in a different way from the first photo. Hamlet grins while he is shaking both Rosencrantz' and Guildenstern's hands, thereby expressing mockery and foolish madness rather than melancholy or serious derangement. Of course this suits the occasion, as Hamlet pokes fun at the two attendants who were sent by the King to find out what is wrong with the prince. At the same time, however, Hamlet is generally portrayed as less dignified than in the first photo, and the stage set also trivialises the conflict by placing it in a present-day and indeed, everyday, context. One has the impression that tragic heroes in the traditional sense are simply no longer possible in our modern day and age.

This example shows that the audience's perception of a play's character largely depends on the way the character is interpreted by the actor, director, make-up artists, costume designers, etc. Costumes as well as

facial expressions and gestures but also the stage set already convey or emphasise certain character traits and create an atmosphere. For this reason, different productions of a play can lead to divergent results.

3.7. Types of Utterance in Drama

Dramatic language is modelled on real-life conversations among people, and yet, when one watches a play, one also has to consider the differences between real talk and drama talk. Dramatic language is ultimately always constructed or 'made up' and it often serves several purposes. On the level of the story-world of a play, language can of course assume all the **pragmatic functions** that can be found in real-life conversations, too: e.g., to ensure mutual understanding and to convey information, to persuade or influence someone, to relate one's experiences or signal emotions, etc. However, dramatic language is often **rhetorical** and **poetic**, i.e., it uses language in ways which differ from standard usage in order to draw attention to its artistic nature (see Language in Literature ch. 1.6.). When analysing dramatic texts, one ought to have a closer look at the various forms of utterance available for drama.

3.7.1. Monologue, Dialogue, Soliloquy

In drama, in contrast to narrative, characters typically talk to one another and the entire plot is carried by and conveyed through their verbal interactions. Language in drama can generally be presented either as **monologue** or **dialogue**. Monologue means that only one character speaks while dialogue always requires two or more participants. A special form of monologue, where no other person is present on stage beside the speaker, is called **soliloquy**. Soliloquies occur frequently in *Richard III* for example, where Richard often remains alone on stage and talks about his secret plans. Soliloquies are mainly used to present a character in more detail and also on a more personal level. In other words: Characters are able to 'speak their mind' in soliloquies. That characters explain their feelings, motives, etc. on stage appears unnatural from a real-life standpoint but this is necessary in plays because it would otherwise be very difficult to convey thoughts, for example. In narrative texts, by contrast, thoughts can be presented directly through techniques such as interior monologue or free indirect discourse (see ch. 2.7.). Consider the famous soliloquy from *Hamlet*:

> To be, or not to be, that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them. To die – to sleep,
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub:
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause – there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
[…]
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. Soft you now,
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.
(*Hamlet*, III, 1: 56-88)

As soon as Ophelia enters the stage ("Soft you now,/ The fair Ophelia", line 86f), Hamlet's speech is technically no longer a soliloquy. Critics often refer to it simply as monologue, as this is the more general term. In case of a **monologue**, other characters can be present on stage, either overhearing the speech of the person talking or even being directly addressed by him or her. The main point is that one person holds the floor for a lengthy period of time. Hamlet's soliloquy reveals his inner conflict to the audience. We learn that he wavers between taking action and remaining passive. The fact that he contemplates the miseries of life, death and the possibility of suicide shows him as a melancholic, almost depressed character. At the same time, his speech is profound and philosophical, and thus Hamlet comes across as thoughtful and intellectual. This example illustrates one of the main functions of language in drama, namely the indirect characterisation of figures.

3.7.2. Asides

Another special form of speech in drama is the so-called **aside**. Asides are spoken away from other characters, and a character either speaks aside to himself, secretly to (an)other character(s) or to the audience (**ad spectatores**). It is conspicuous that plays of the **Elizabethan Age** make significantly more use of asides than modern plays, for example. One of the reasons certainly has to do with the shape of the stage. The **apron stage**, which was surrounded by the audience on three sides, makes asides more effective since the actor who speaks, inevitably faces part of the audience, while our modern **proscenium stage** does not really lend itself to asides as the vicinity between actors and audience is missing. Asides are an important device because they channel extra information past other characters directly to the audience. Thus, spectators are in a way taken into confidence and they often become 'partners-in-crime', so to speak, because they ultimately know more than some of the figures on stage (see Information Flow ch. 3.2.).

SO WHAT?

Dramatic language is multi-faceted and fulfils a number of functions within a play. As a consequence it can have various effects on the audience.

Consider, for example, the way asides are employed in Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. After the discovery of the Duke's dead body, the various characters react differently and express this in asides:

LUSSURIOSO: Behold, behold, my lords!
    The Duke my father's murdered by a vassal
    That owes this habit and here left disguised.
[*Enter* DUCHESS *and* SPURIO.]
DUCHESS My lord and husband!
[FIRST NOBLE]   Reverend Majesty.
[SECOND NOBLE] I have seen these clothes often attending on him.
VINDICE [*aside*] That nobleman has been i'th'country, for he does not lie.
SUPERVACUO [*aside*] Learn of our mother, let's dissemble too.
    I am glad he's vanished; so I hope are you.
AMBITIOSO [*aside*] Ay, you may take my word for't.
SPURIO [*aside*] Old dad dead?
    I, one of his cast sins, will send the fates
    Most hearty commendations by his own son;
    I'll tug in the new stream till strength be done.
[…]
HIPPOLITO [*aside*] Brother, how happy is our vengeance!
VINDICE [*aside*]   Why, it hits
    Past the apprehension of indifferent wits.
LUSSURIOSO My lord, let post-horse be sent
    Into all places to entrap the villain.
VINDICE [*aside*] Post-horse! Ha, ha!
NOBLE My lord, we're something bold to know our duty:
    Your father's accidentally departed;
    The titles that were due to him meet you.
LUSSURIOSO Meet me? I'm not at leisure my good lord,
    I've many griefs to dispatch out o'the'way.
    [*Aside*] Welcome, sweet titles. – Talk to me, my lords,
    Of sepulchres and mighty emperors' bones;
    That's thought for me.
VINDICE [*aside*]   So, one may see by this
    How foreign markets go:
    Courtiers have feet o'th'nines, and tongues o'th'twelves,
    They flatter dukes and dukes flatter themselves.
    (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, V, 1: 105-148)

Asides are used to such an extent here that they make the entire plot with the characters' secrets and hidden thoughts almost farcical. The asides in this excerpt are spoken both to other characters as when Ambitioso and Supervacuo talk to one another aside from the others (lines 111-113), and to oneself, e.g., when Lussurioso expresses his secret joy about the Duke's death because that means he will accede to the throne (line 143). The asides provide further information, e.g., concerning Spurio's plan to kill the new Duke (lines 114-117), but mostly they are used here to reveal the different characters' double standards and hidden agendas. None of the Duke's sons is really sad about his death, which is finally commented on by Vindice in another aside (lines 145-148).

Furthermore, the asides also clarify groups of characters who share their respective secrets: Supervacuo and Ambitioso and Vindice and Hippolito. Vindice's and Hippolito's asides are often ironic because they actually committed the crime and now revel in their success. This example shows that a linguistic device such as an aside can serve various purposes and needs to be analysed in context.

When asides are used in an extraordinarily extensive way, as is the case in the *Revenger's Tragedy*, one may also ask why this is done. Although the aside was a common technique in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, its application is undoubtedly exaggerated in Tourneur's tragedy. Occasionally, one forms the impression that the characters speak nearly as much aside as they speak openly to other characters. As a result, the aside as an artificial theatrical device is highlighted and brought to the viewer's attention, which in turn potentially ridicules contemporary conventions. The audience not only becomes aware of the characters' secret thoughts but it is also fully conscious of the fact that what it watches is simply a play that has been 'constructed' following traditional conventions. In a sense, the play thus pokes fun at itself and adds an unexpected layer of humour to a genre which originally was not meant to be humorous at all (revenge tragedy**)**

3.7.3. Turn Allocation, Stichomythia, Repartee

In comparison to monologues and asides, dialogue is by far the most frequently used type of speech in drama. In analysing dialogue, one can look at **turn-taking** and the **allocation of turns** to different speakers, e.g., how many lines is each character's turn? Do some characters have longer turns than others and, if so, why? One can also analyse how often a character gets the chance to speak through the entire play and whether he or she is interrupted by others or not. For an example consider the excerpt from John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in the So What section below.

A special type of turn allocation occurs when speaker's alternating turns are of one line each. This is called **stichomythia** and is often, albeit not exclusively, used in contexts where characters compete or disagree with one another. In the following excerpt from *Richard III*, Richard tries to persuade Elizabeth to woo her daughter on his behalf:

> KING RICHARD Infer fair England's peace by this alliance.
> ELIZABETH   Which she shall purchase with still-lasting war.
> KING RICHARD Tell her the King, that may command, entreats.
> ELIZABETH   That, at her hands, which the King's King forbids.
> KING RICHARD Say she shall be a high and mighty queen.
> ELIZABETH   To vail the title, as her mother doth.
> KING RICHARD Say I will love her everlastingly.
> ELIZABETH   But how long shall that title 'ever' last?
> KING RICHARD Sweetly in force, until her fair life's end.
> ELZABETH   But how long fairly shall her sweet life last?
> KING RICHARD As long as heaven and nature lengthens it.
> ELIZABETH   As long as hell and Richard likes of it.
> KING RICHARD Say I, her sovereign, am her subject low.
> ELIZABETH   But she, your subject, loathes such sovereignty.
> KING RICHARD Be eloquent in my behalf to her.

ELIZABETH   An honest tale speeds best being plainly told.
KING RICHARD Then plainly to her tell my loving tale.
ELIZABETH   Plain and not honest is too harsh a style.
KING RICHARD Your reasons are too shallow and too quick.
[…]
(*Richard III*, IV, 4: 343-361)

This dialogue is marked by **repartees**, i.e., quick responses given in order to top remarks of another speaker or to use them to one's own advantage. The repartees in this example express Elizabeth's doubts and counter-arguments. The fact that stichomythia is used here underlines the argumentative character of this conversation. In a sense, Richard and Elizabeth compete rhetorically: Richard in order to persuade Elizabeth and Elizabeth in order to resist Richard's persuasive devices. Through the quick turn-taking mechanism, the dialogue also appears livelier and in itself represents fast action.

This is reinforced by a number of word plays and rhetorical figures which use the repetition of words and sounds and thus demonstrate how tightly connected the individual turns are and that each turn immediately responds to the previous one: "everlastingly" – "ever last" (349f); **figura etymologica**: "sweetly" – "sweet" (351f), "fair" – "fairly" (351f), "sovereign" – "sovereignty" (356f); **parallelism**: "As long as…/ As long as…" (353f); **assonance:** "low", "loathes" (356f); **chiasmus**: "An honest tale speeds best being plainly told. / Then plainly to her tell my loving tale" (358f).

So What?

The distribution and amount of turns speakers are allocated in plays is an important feature to investigate in drama. Let us have a look at the following excerpt from John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, where Jimmy starts to rage after Alison has told him she wants to go to church with her friend, Helena:

JIMMY: You're doing what?
Silence.
Have you gone out of your mind or something? (*To Helena.*) You're determined to win her, aren't you? So it's come to this now! How feeble can you get? (*His rage mounting within.*) When I think of what I did, what I endured, to get you out –
ALISON: (*recognising an onslaught on the way, starts to panic*). Oh yes, we all know what you did for me! You rescued me from the wicked clutches of my family, and all my friends! I'd still be rotting away at home, if you hadn't ridden up on your charger, and carried me off!
The wild note in her voice has re-assured him. His anger cools and hardens. His voice is quite calm when he speaks.
JIMMY: The funny thing is, you know, I really did have to ride up on a white charger – off white, really. Mummy locked her up in their eight bedroomed castle, didn't she? There is no limit to what the middle-aged mummy will do in the holy crusade against ruffians like

me. Mummy and I took one quick look at each other, and, from then on, the age of chivalry was dead. I knew that, to protect her innocent young, she wouldn't hesitate to cheat, lie, bully, and blackmail. Threatened with me, a young man without money, background or even looks, she'd bellow like a rhinoceros in labour – enough to make every male rhino for miles turn white, and pledge himself to celibacy. But even I under-estimated her strength. Mummy may look over-fed and a bit flabby on the outside, but don't let that well-bred guzzler fool you. Underneath all that, she's armour plated –
[…]
All so that I shan't carry off her daughter on that poor old charger of mine, all tricked out and caparisoned in discredited passions and ideals! The old grey mare that actually once led the charge against the old order – well, she certainly ain't what she used to be. It was all she could do to carry me, but your weight (*to Alison*) was too much for her. She just dropped dead on the way.

CLIFF: (*quietly*). Don't let's brawl, boyo. It won't do any good.[…]
(*Look Back in Anger*, II, 1)

Alison, anticipating Jimmy's criticism, at first interrupts him. This is typical of arguments, especially when people are emotional in that situation. Then, however, Jimmy takes over again and his turn is significantly longer than anyone else's in this scene (although it is even abbreviated here!). On the one hand, this indicates Jimmy's open and unrestrained rage, and on the other hand it signals to the audience that he is the dominant character in this scene. In fact, Jimmy is allocated most turns in the play and his turns are the longest on average, which demonstrates even on a linguistic level that he domineers not only over his wife but also his friends.

At the same time, one can recognise a discrepancy between Jimmy's talk and his actions. While he shouts all the time and criticises everyone, he does not really manage to change anything in his own life. Verbally more than active, he remains disappointingly passive as far as his personal circumstances are concerned and thus involuntarily conveys a sense of failure to the audience. The imagery Jimmy uses in his speech underlines this discrepancy. With a touch of self-irony, Jimmy draws upon the semantic field of chivalry and romance, thereby implicitly claiming for himself the role of a hero who had to 'rescue' Alison from her overpowering mother: "carry off her daughter". The motorbike is affectionately likened to an "old grey mare", which had "led the charge against the old order". Jimmy's 'fight' against the establishment is evoked in this image, and Alison is indirectly blamed for the fact that all this 'heroism' is over now: "but your weight […] was too much for her". Alison's mother is downgraded by a rhetorically adept comparison with the animal world and derogatory references to her physical appearance: "to protect her innocent young", "she'd bellow like a rhinoceros in labour", "over-fed", "flabby", "well-bred guzzler".

Jimmy's rage finds an outlet in lengthy speeches whose main purpose is to insult and provoke people. While his seemingly confident way of speaking conveys an illusion of being in the right, the audience soon realises that all this anger probably covers a feeling of vulnerability in Jimmy and a sense of dissatisfaction with himself. From an objective, outside point

of view, Jimmy's life can be considered a failure. He has not achieved any of his lofty aims.

Occasionally, even the lack of language can be significant. Silence, which can sometimes hardly be borne in real-life conversations, appears as particularly marked in plays, especially when it lasts for a lengthy time. In the final scene of Edward Bond's *Saved*, the characters move and act but do not say a word:

> *The living-room.*
> PAM *sits on the couch. She reads the* Radio Times.
> MARY *takes things from the table and goes out. Pause. She comes back. She goes to the table. She collects the plates. She goes out.*
> *Pause. The door opens.* HARRY *comes in. He goes to the table and opens the drawer. He searches in it.*
> PAM *turns a page.*
> MARY *comes in. She goes to the table and picks up the last things on it. She goes out.*
> HARRY'S *jacket is draped on the back of the chair by the table. He searches in the pockets.*
> PAM *turns a page:*
> *There is a loud bang (off).*
> *Silence.*
> HARRY *turns to the table and searches in the drawer.*
> MARY *comes in. She wipes the table top with a damp cloth.*
> *There is a loud bang (off).*
> MARY *goes out.*
> […]
> (*Saved*, 13)

The scene continues like this right until the end without the characters talking to one another. This final scene is the culmination point of a play in which lack of communication and educational as well as emotional poverty constitute central themes. In a way, the silence is indicative of the characters' lack of a real relationship, and ultimately of the senselessness of their lives. This is best brought home to the audience by means of a lasting silence, which seems oppressive and yet inevitable.

At the same time, life is shown to continue, no matter what happens. Even the outrageous and incredibly violent murder of Pam's baby by means of stoning has not really had a significant impact on either Pam's or her family's life. The message one gets is that nothing can be done or changed. Language or better, the lack of language, thus becomes symbolic and has wider implications for our understanding of a society where cultural and emotional deprivation engenders violence.

In Edward Bond's own words, the ending can even be considered optimistic since at least one person, Len, does seem to care: "The play ends in a silent social stalemate, but if the spectator thinks this is pessimistic that is because he has not learned to clutch at straws. […] The gesture of turning the other cheek is often the gesture of refusing to look facts in the face – but this is not true of Len. He lives with people at their worst and most hopeless (that is the point of the final scene) and does not turn away from them. I cannot imagine an optimism more tenacious, disciplined or honest than his" (*Saved*, Author's Note). In fact, it is Len who continuously breaks

the silence of the final scene by banging on the chair in order to fix it and, significantly enough, he is given the only line in the entire scene when he instructs Pam to fetch his hammer. The attempt to fix the chair can be interpreted as a final attempt at 'fixing' these people's family life.

3.7.4. The Significance of Wordplay in Drama

The play with language entertains spectators and at the same time attracts and sustains their attention. Consider the way Polonius introduces to the King and Queen his explanation for Hamlet's 'madness':

> Madam, I swear I use no art at all.
> That he is mad 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity;
> And pity 'tis 'tis true. A foolish figure-
> But farewell it, for I will use no art.
> Mad let us grant him then. And now remains
> That we find out the cause of this effect,
> Or rather say the cause of this defect,
> For this effect defective comes by cause.
> Thus it remains; and the remainder thus:
> [...]
> (*Hamlet*, II, 2: 96-104)

By constantly juxtaposing and repeating words, Polonius attempts to display his 'cleverness' because he believes to have found out the cause for Hamlet's madness, namely Hamlet's interest in Ophelia, Polonius' daughter. This play with sound patterns and words catches the audience's attention because it deviates from normal uses of language. At the same time, it is entertaining, especially since the audience knows that Polonius' assumption is wrong and Ophelia is not the reason for Hamlet's madness. Thus, rather than appearing as clever, Polonius comes across as a fool who even uses a fool's language (although real fools were traditionally considered wise men who indirectly told the truth and held up a mirror to society through their playful language).

A special type of wordplay is the so-called **pun**, where words are used which are the same or at least similar in sound and spelling (**homonyms**) but differ in meaning. Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, centres on the pun on the name Ernest and the adjective 'earnest', which denotes the character trait of being sincere and serious.

Puns were also very common in Elizabethan plays and they were used both for comical and serious effects. Consider, for example, Hamlet's advice to Polonius concerning his daughter Ophelia:

> Let her not walk i'th'sun. Conception is a blessing,
> But as your daughter may conceive – friend, look
> To't. [...]
> (*Hamlet*, II, 2: 184-186)

When Hamlet warns Polonius not to let his daughter "walk in the sun", this can mean quite literally that she should not walk outside, e.g., in public places, but if one considers that the sun in Elizabethan times was also used

as a royal emblem, the sentence can be read as an indirect warning not to let Ophelia come near Hamlet himself. Another pun is used with the words "conception" and "conceive", which on the one hand refer to the formation of ideas and hence are positive ("blessing") but on the other hand also mean that a woman becomes pregnant, which was not desirable for an unmarried woman. Thus, Hamlet implicitly advises Polonius to take care of his daughter lest she should lose her innocence and consequently her good reputation. The puns, albeit funny at first glance, convey a serious message.

Another concept to be mentioned in the context of play with language is **wit**. The idea of wit, which combines humour and intellect, plays a significant role in the so-called **comedy of manners**. Wit is expressed in brief verbal expressions which are intentionally contrived to create a comic surprise. It was particularly popular in plays of the **Restoration Period**, and the most well-known examples are William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700).

Another author famous for his witty plays is the late nineteenth-century writer Oscar Wilde. Consider the following brief excerpt from his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

> LADY BRACKNELL Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well.
> ALGERNON I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.
> LADY BRACKNELL That's not quite the same thing. In fact the two things rarely go together. [*Sees Jack and bows to him with icy coldness.*]
> ALGERNON [*To Gwendolen*] Dear me, you are smart!
> GWENDOLEN I am always smart! Aren't I, Mr Worthing?
> JACK You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax.
> GWENDOLEN Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions.
> (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, I)

This short verbal exchange where four of the characters greet one another abounds in witty remarks and comments, which are meant to display the speakers' cleverness. Lady Bracknell, for example, signals with her reply to Algernon that she is a knowledgeable woman, who has had some experience of the world. Gwendolen's reply to Jack's compliment shows her coquetry. She is fully aware of her effect on Jack and plays with her attractiveness. While language here portrays society and its behavioural codes at large, it also gives an indirect characterisation of individual characters.

3.8. Types of Stage

Drama, just like the other genres, has undergone significant changes in its historical development. This is partly attributable to the fact that stage types have also changed and have thus required different forms of acting. Let us have a look at the various stage forms throughout history (based on Pfister 1997: 41-45):

Key terms:
- amphitheatre
- mystery play
- morality play
- apron stage
- proscenium stage / picture frame stage

3.8.1. Greek Classicism

Plays in ancient Greece were staged in **amphitheatres**, which were marked by a round stage about three quarters surrounded by the audience. Since amphitheatres were very large and could hold great masses of people (up to 25,000), the actors could hardly be seen from far back, and for this reason, acting included speaking in a loud, declamatory voice, wearing masks and symbolical costumes and acting with large gestures.

      The **chorus** was a vital part of ancient drama. It had the function of commenting on the play as well as giving warning and advice to characters. The stage scenery was neutral and was accompanied by the real landscape surrounding the amphitheatre. Plays were performed in broad daylight, which also made it impossible to create an illusion of 'real life' on stage, at least for night scenes. That was not intended anyway. Ancient Greek drama was originally performed on special occasions like religious ceremonies, and it thus had a more ritual, symbolic and also didactic purpose. Another interesting fact to know is that the audience in ancient Greece consisted only of free men, i.e., slaves and women were excluded.
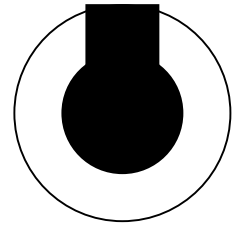
3.8.2. The Middle Ages:

Medieval plays were primarily performed during religious festivities (**mystery plays**, **morality plays**). They were staged on wagons, which stopped somewhere in the market place and were entirely surrounded by the audience. The close vicinity between actors and audience has to account for a way of acting which combined serious renditions of the topic in question with stand-up comedy and funny or bawdy scenes, depending on the taste of the audience. Actors took into account the everyday experiences of their viewers and there was much more interaction between audience and actors than nowadays. The lack of clear boundaries between stage and audience again impeded the creation of a realistic illusion, which was also not intended.
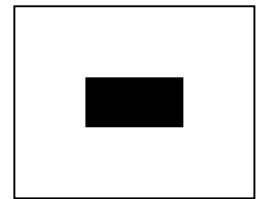
3.8.3. Renaissance England:

The Elizabethan stage was typically found in public theatres, i.e., plays were no longer performed outside. However, the Elizabethan theatre was still an open-air theatre as the lack of artificial lighting made daylight necessary for performances. An exception was the Blackfriars theatre, which was indoors and lit by candlelight. Theatre groups were now professional and sponsored by wealthy aristocrats. Groups which were not under anybody's patronage were considered disreputable vagabonds.

The stage was surrounded by the audience on three sides and there was still a close vicinity between audience and actors. The most common stage form in Renaissance England was the **apron stage** which was surrounded by the audience on three sides. This meant that actors could not possibly ignore their viewers, and theatrical devices such as **asides** and monologues **ad spectatores** were an integral part of the communication system. The stage set was reasonably barren while costumes could be very elaborate. Since performances took place in broad daylight, the audience had to imagine scenes set at night, for example, and respective information had to be conveyed rhetorically in the characters' speeches (**word scenery**). As there was barely any scenery, scenes could change very quickly with people entering and exiting. The **three unities** were thus frequently not strictly adhered to in Elizabethan drama. The Elizabethan theatre could hold up to 2,000 people, and the audience was rather heterogeneous, consisting of people from different social backgrounds. Plays of that period thus typically combine various subject matters and modes (e.g., tragic and comical) because they attempted to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.
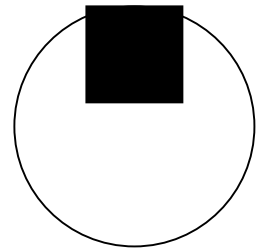
3.8.4. Restoration Period:

Theatres of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were considerably smaller than the Elizabethan theatre (they held around 500 people), and performances took place in closed rooms with artificial lighting. In contrast to modern theatres where the audience sits in the dark, the audience in the Restoration period was seated in a fully illuminated room. One must bear in mind that people of the higher social class were also interested in presenting themselves in public, and attending a play offered just such an opportunity. Because of the lighting arrangement, the division between audience and actors was thus not as clear-cut as today. Plays had the status of a cultural event, and the audience was more homogeneous than in earlier periods, belonging primarily to higher social classes. While the stage was closed in by a decorative frame and the distance between audience and actors was thus enlarged, there was still room for interaction by means of a minor stage jutting out into the auditorium. Furthermore, there was no curtain so that changes of scene had to take place on stage in front of the audience. Restoration plays thus still did not aim at creating a sense of realism but they presented an idealised, highly stylised image of scenery, characters, language and subject matter.
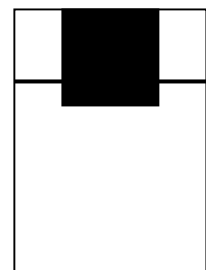
3.8.5. Modern Times:

The stage of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is called **proscenium stage** or **picture frame stage** because it is shaped in such a way that the audience watches the play as it would regard a picture: The ramp clearly separates actors and audience, and the curtain underlines this division. Furthermore, while the stage is illuminated during the performance, the auditorium remains dark, which also turns the audience into an anonymous mass. Since the audience is thus not disturbed from watching the play and can fully concentrate on the action on stage, it becomes easier to create an illusion of real life in plays. Furthermore, the scenery is now often elaborate and as true-to-life as possible thanks to new technologies and more detailed stage props.

 While many modern plays aim at creating the illusion of a story-world 'as it could be in real life' and acting conventions follow this dictum accordingly, there have also been a great number of theatrical movements which counter exactly this realism. However, the modern stage form has not been able to fully accommodate to the needs of more experimental plays (e.g., the **epic theatre**), nor to older plays such as those of ancient Greece or the Elizabethan Age simply because the overall stage conventions diverge too much. For this reason, we find nowadays a wide range of different types of stage alongside the proscenium stage of conventional theatres.
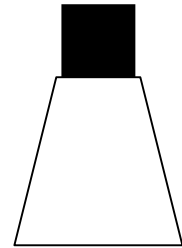
3.9. Dramatic Sub-genres

Ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*, one distinguishes at least between two sub-genres of drama: **comedy** and **tragedy** (see also Genre ch.1.4.2.). While comedy typically aims at entertaining the audience and making it laugh by reassuring them that no disaster will occur and that the outcome of possible conflicts will be positive for the characters involved, tragedy tries to raise the audience's concern, to confront viewers with serious action and conflicts, which typically end in a catastrophe (usually involving the death of the protagonist and possibly others). Both comedy and tragedy have, in the course of literary history, developed further sub-genres of which the following list provides only an initial overview.

Key terms:
- high comedy
- low comedy
- romantic comedy
- satiric comedy
- comedy of manners
- farce
- commedia dell'arte
- comedy of humours
- melodrama
- Senecan tragedy
- revenge tragedy
- dumb show
- play-within-the-play
- domestic tragedy (bourgeois tragedy)
- anti-hero
- tragicomedy

3.9.1. Types of Comedy

Sometimes, scholars distinguish between **high comedy**, which appeals to the intellect (comedy of ideas) and has a serious purpose (for example, to criticise), and **low comedy**, where greater emphasis is placed on situation comedy, slapstick and farce. There are further sub-genres of comedy:

Romantic Comedy:
A pair of lovers and their struggle to come together is usually at the centre of romantic comedy. Romantic comedies also involve some extraordinary circumstances, e.g., magic, dreams, the fairy-world, etc. Examples are Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*.

Satiric Comedy:
Satiric comedy has a critical purpose. It usually attacks philosophical notions or political practices as well as general deviations from social norms by ridiculing characters. In other words: the aim is not to make people 'laugh with' the characters but 'laugh at' them. An early writer of satirical comedies was Aristophanes (450-385 BC), later examples include Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemists*.

Comedy of Manners:
The comedy of manners is also satirical in its outlook and it takes the artificial and sophisticated behaviour of the higher social classes under closer scrutiny. The plot usually revolves around love or some sort of amorous intrigue and the language is marked by witty repartees and cynicism. Ancient representatives of this form of comedy are Terence and Plautus, and the form reached its peak with the **Restoration comedies** of William Wycherley and William Congreve.

Farce:
The farce typically provokes viewers to hearty laughter. It presents highly exaggerated and caricatured types of characters and often has an unlikely plot. Farces employ sexual mix-ups, verbal humour and physical comedy, and they formed a central part of the Italian ***commedia dell'arte***. In English plays, farce usually appears as episodes in larger comical pieces, e.g., in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Comedy of Humours:
Ben Jonson developed the comedy of humours, which is based on the assumption that a person's character or temperament is determined by the predominance of one of four **humours** (i.e., body liquids): blood (= sanguine), phlegm (= phlegmatic), yellow bile (= choleric), black bile (= melancholic). In the comedy of humours, characters are marked by one of these predispositions which cause their eccentricity or distorted personality. An example is Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*.

Melodrama:
Melodrama is a type of stage play which became popular in the 19th century. It mixes romantic or sensational plots with musical elements. Later, the musical elements were no longer considered essential. Melodrama aims at a violent appeal to audience emotions and usually has a happy ending.

3.9.2. Types of Tragedy

Senecan Tragedy:
A precursor of tragic drama were the tragedies by the Roman poet Seneca (4 BC – 65 AD). His tragedies were recited rather than staged but they became a model for English playwrights entailing the five-act structure, a complex plot and an elevated style of dialogue.

Revenge Tragedy / Tragedy of Blood:
This type of tragedy represented a popular genre in the Elizabethan Age and made extensive use of certain elements of the Senecan tragedy such as

murder, revenge, mutilations and ghosts. Typical examples of this sub-genre are Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. These plays were written in verse and, following Aristotelian poetics, the main characters were of a high social rank (the higher they are, the lower they fall). Apart from dealing with violent subject matters, these plays conventionally made use of **dumb shows** or **play-within-the-play**, that is a play performed as part of the plot of the play as for example 'The Mousetrap' which is performed in *Hamlet*, and feigned or real madness in some of the characters.

Domestic / Bourgeois Tragedy:
In line with a changing social system where the middle class gained increasing importance and power, tragedies from the 18ᵗʰ century onward shifted their focus to protagonists from the middle or lower classes and were written in prose. The protagonist typically suffers a domestic disaster which is intended to arouse empathy rather than pity and fear in the audience. An example is George Lillo's *The London Merchant: or, The History of George Barnwell* (1731).

Modern tragedies such as Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) follow largely the new conventions set forth by the domestic tragedy (common conflict, common characters, prose) and a number of contemporary plays have exchanged the tragic hero for an **anti-hero**, who does not display the dignity and courage of a traditional hero but is passive, petty and ineffectual. Other dramas resuscitate elements of ancient tragedies such as the chorus and verse, e.g., T.S. Eliot's *The Murder in the Cathedral* (1935).

Tragicomedy:
The boundaries of genres are often blurred in drama and occasionally they lead to the emergence of new sub-genres, e.g., the **tragicomedy**. Tragicomedies, as the name suggests, intermingle conventions concerning plot, character and subject matter derived from both tragedy and comedy. Thus, characters of both high and low social rank can be mixed as in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), or a serious conflict, which is likely to end in disaster, suddenly reaches a happy ending because of some unforeseen circumstances as in John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c.1609). Plays with multiple plots which combine tragedy in one plot and comedy in the other are also occasionally referred to as tragicomedies (e.g., Thomas Middleton's and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, 1622).

So What?

Let us consider Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (c.1607). The title as such already allocates the play to a specific genre, the so-called revenge tragedy, but when one reads the play one is often struck by the mixture of tragedy and comedy. Act III, Scene 5 offers a particularly poignant example. In this scene, Vindice carefully prepares and eventually executes his revenge on the lecherous Duke who killed Vindice's fiancée because she resisted his advances. In a rhetorically powerful speech, Vindice philosophises about the transience of life and hence the pointlessness of giving up morality for pleasure:

Does the silk-worm expend her yellow labours
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?
[…]
Does every proud and self-affecting dame
Camphor her face for this, and grieve her Maker
In sinful baths of milk, – when many an infant starves
For her superfluous outside, – all for this?
(*The Revenger's Tragedy*, III, 5: 71-86)

The topic and rhetoric is reminiscent of Hamlet's philosophical contemplations but this serious tone is not maintained throughout the scene. When Vindice disguises the skull of his dead fiancée, for example, he addresses 'her' as follows:

Madam, his grace will not be absent long.
Secret? Ne'er doubt us madam; 'twill be worth
Three velvet gowns to your ladyship. Known?
Few ladies respect that disgrace, a poor thin shell!
'Tis the best grace you have to do it well;
I'll save your hand that labour, I'll unmask you.
(*The Revenger's Tragedy*, III, 5: 43-48)

Vindice appears to be almost mad. He seems to be carried away by the idea that his time of revenge is finally approaching. At the same time, he takes pleasure in 'staging' the Duke's death and he makes a number of comments during the scene which create irony for the spectators who, unlike the Duke, know exactly what is going on (dramatic irony, see ch. 3.2.3.1.). Thus, he puns on the "grave look" (II, 5: 137) of the "bashful" lady (III, 5:133), which is absolutely hilarious for the audience. Playing with words is a typical feature of the language style in comedies as it offers a lightness of tone which contrasts with the heroic and serious style of tragic speeches (wordplay can also be used in serious contexts, however, see ch. 3.7.4.). Vindice's brother, Hippolito, also uses a playful tone when he says:

Yet 'tis no wonder, now I think again,
To have a lady stoop to a duke, that stoops unto his men.
'Tis common to be common through the world,
And there's more private common shadowing vices
Than those who are known both by their names and prices.
(*The Revenger's Tragedy*, III, 5: 36-40)

The repetition of "stoop" and "common" reminds one of the language of comedies where witty remarks are often clad in puns. Scene 5 reaches its climax when the Duke kisses the skull and is thus poisoned. The Duke's first reaction is surprise: "Oh, what's this? Oh!" (III, 5: 160). Depending on how this line is spoken, it can be very amusing.

The same applies to the way the Duke dies. First of all, it takes an unusually long time and, apart from a few short phrases, the Duke is only able to utter "oh" every once in a while. There is no moving speech, and the

Duke's death lacks the dignity of other tragic deaths. Quite on the contrary, Vindice and Hippolito even further downgrade the Duke by stamping on him sadistically and by making jokes on the Duke's lament: "My teeth are eaten out" (III, 5: 160), meaning 'I am dying'. "Hadst any left?" (ibid.), Vindice asks back, and Hippolito remarks: "I think but few" (III, 5: 161). Finally, Vindice becomes impatient because the Duke is still alive and he says: "What! Is not thy tongue eaten out yet?" (III, 5: 190). This kind of wordplay deflates a fundamentally tragic event and presents it in an almost humorous manner. Scenes like this thus appear, especially to a modern audience, more like a farce or parody than tragedy. Of course this very much depends on how a director chooses to stage this play. *The Revenger's Tragedy* can easily be performed in a comical manner because there is great comical potential in the way the subject matter is rendered linguistically and plot-wise.

Tourneur's play is not exceptional for its time. A number of plays in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period somehow waver between being comedies or tragedies, and difficulties in classifying plays as 'either/or' already induced contemporary authors to speak about their plays as tragicomedies (e.g., John Fletcher in the preface to his play *The Faithful Shepherdess*). This shows that generic terms are somewhat arbitrary and dependent on culturally defined conventions, which one needs to know in order to be able to discuss plays appropriately in their context.

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