

Howard University

Digital Howard @ Howard University

Department of English Faculty Publications

Department of English

9-1-1961

An Introduction to The Drama

John Lovell

Howard University

Follow this and additional works at: https://dh.howard.edu/eng_fac



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lovell, John, "An Introduction to The Drama" (1961). *Department of English Faculty Publications*. 5.
https://dh.howard.edu/eng_fac/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

2. An Introduction To The Drama

In this LECTURE, Dr. John Lovell Jr. professor in English at Howard University and Fulbright lecturer at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies, presents drama as an idealization of life of each individual, nation and historic period.

DR. JOHN LOVELL, JR.

1. The Drama and Human Aspirations

Every person lives a life that is affected in some way by dramatic considerations. Each one of us although born and developed in a finite, limited world, with feet planted on clay, has, nevertheless, his eyes set towards the sky, towards some azure mountain top where he hopes to live someday. This is the first element of the drama, the portraying of a character who aspires and attempts to attain a high plane of life. The second element in drama is a series of obstacles which hinder or prevent the character from achieving this idealistic peak of life. And the third element is the conflict or struggle between this character and the obstacles which bar him from attaining his aspirations.

The triumph over the difficulties and the attainment of this ideal existence depend entirely upon the endurance and strength of the character. The portrayal of this strength and endurance in the drama is known as characterization. Each one of us learns from such a struggle whether he possesses certain high qualities of character such as bravery or compassion, friendliness or nobility. And curiously enough this seems to be the only way to discover our true character—through the crucible of struggle and suffering, through the understanding and

appreciation of the difference between our aspirations and the facts of our everyday life.

Now when this quality is crystallized into a national characteristic, we have what is called a national drama. While it is true that each individual has his own personal aspirations, it is likewise true that each country also has its own aspirations and the resultant problems inevitably encountered to develop these aspirations. If the determination of the character to realize these aspirations is weak and he does not struggle very hard, he achieves very little or nothing at all. If his aspirations are high and he is fully determined to attain them, then very much could be achieved in spite of the fact that the individual may fail in the ensuing struggle, he still demonstrates a quality of nobility and greatness which is universally admired by all human beings.

2. The American Drama

What we call American Drama, like any other national drama, deals primarily with universal qualities inherent in its people. Although people of all nations are basically alike yet there are characteristics peculiar to every country. For example, the American drama was confronted by the question of whether or not to follow the rather fancy ways of society introduced to the American people by France and England or whether to follow the plain, honest, realistic ways of everyday society which are true and indigenous to the American soil. Relevant to this discussion is the mention of one of the first native American drama entitled "The Contrast".

In this play, the contrast between the characteristics of the high society of England and France and the more sober, ordinary and realistic one of the Americans was graphically portrayed. Naturally in order to make his meaning not only clear but also entertaining to the public, the playwright had to build the drama into the form of a story which was of universal interest in that it depicted the love affair of a young lady who was rich and gracious and the struggle between two young men who aspired to win her love. One of them had been trained in fanciful social etiquette of France and England. He dressed fashion-

ably, spoke and conducted himself in a most elegant manner. The other young man, typical of the American race, was more direct, serious, sober and he did not believe in the effete mores of a decadent society. The theme of the story revolved on whether the young lady in question would prefer the fashionable but weak character representative of English and French society or the rather rough-mannered young man with the strong character representative of American society. Proper to and expected of the American way of life, the girl had really no alternative but to choose the young man with the strong character over his rival with the social fineness.

3. The Drama and Moral Values

This brings us to an important question. You might not realize it but all dramas basically deal with moral values. If a playwright attempts to teach in his drama a moral lesson he will fail in his purpose. Drama is something that has to be acted, not taught. Each one of us pays more attention to what a person says or does in life and not on the commentary as to how he should say or do it. In the drama, we learn about the moral strength and moral fiber of the people by watching and studying their reactions under pressure or stress.

Essentially all dramas deal with moral questions and issues, with man's relationship to the deepest values of the universe. I had just told one member of this group before I said to him that in most countries of the world the drama originates from the church. In nearly all the national dramas, some form of religious ritual, ceremony or cult practices brought about the origin of the drama. The drama of the ancient Greek started first as a religious dance with song and dialogue and then developed later on into the epic dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

4. The Bunraku or the Japanese Doll Drama

In Japan the drama also originated chiefly from some ceremonies connected with the practice of the Buddhist religion. But as the play develops, it assimilates many characteristics which include other religious beliefs and ceremonies some of which

were Christian in nature, partly accountable to the impression and influence made by the early Christian missionaries in Japan who came from the west in the XVI century. In the Japanese drama we observe the same essential purpose present in the American drama for its primary aim is to suggest to the people what should be the noblest aspirations of life. Japanese drama contains many artificial devices such as the use of costume, mask and cast. But all these contribute to an all-important effect which is to suggest to the audience the noble and lofty aspirations of man and the different ways by which the human character could project itself outward in the struggle to rise from a low level to a higher level of life. You will have, for example, the *Joruri* or *Bunraku* which is a puppet or a doll drama. The *Bunraku* has a great many characteristics we find in regular dramas. When you go to a *Bunraku* show you will be surprised to find that the characters are puppets or dolls and you will exclaim: "Oh, this is a puppet drama and I don't think I will be much interested in dolls." But if you will look at the puppet master you will be much interested in the skillfull way he manipulates the dolls. And you will notice that in another part of the stage are musicians proving that all great dramas arise from musical impulses. And the musicians play several types of instruments and the music harmonizes with the actions of the dolls. And then you will also notice that there is present in the stage what is called a *gidayu* singer, an individual who interprets or tells the narrative as the drama unfolded. He sits right beside the musicians and he tells you what is going on in the stage.

I found no difficulty at all in following the story especially because the *gidayu* singer interprets completely the actions in the drama. If the main character is having a hard time, the *gidayu* singer's voice will break and you can see real tears flowing down his face and you feel so sorry for him you can hardly watch the play of emotions on his face without being moved. And a few minutes later when an element of happiness is introduced into the story, he will begin to laugh and he laughs so devastatingly you could not help but laugh also whether you are laughing or not. The props in the setting of a *Bunraku* play are very exact. If there is a jewel, or a castle, or a tree, or a mountain, these are presented in detail. You could see the je-

wel and the castle, the mountain and the trees at the side of the mountain and a river flowing near the mountain. If it is a moonlight night, the moon is there and it is reflected on the water. If the weather changes, the change is reflected.

You have, therefore, in this type of drama a combination of dramatic devices which are not just for show. They are there in order to combine with the acting of the dolls and to tell you this much: that after a little while, those dolls are not dolls anymore although you actually see them as such in the stage. You cannot watch the play without being impressed by the fact that whether people use dolls on the stage or not, the basic human motives are present and that the doll is taking the place of a human being who is reaching out towards unattained aspirations, responding to challenges and difficulties with heroism and nobility. Here lies the meaning and the dramatic force of the *bunraku*: the power that transforms a doll into a human being, into a person who is trying tremendously to be important and who is opposed by evil forces. But in spite of the tremendous array of evil forces opposing him, he is determined to overcome them and reach his noble goal.

5. Modern Life and Modern Drama

Some people would like to separate the form of a drama from its meaning. But that is not possible. The next time you watch a play of any kind, whether it is in the movies, on television, or on the stage, I want you to notice that there is no real separation between the form and the story. They are two different aspects of the same thing. The quality of the story is expressed in terms of the form and in terms of the character. To us, form and character are separable. Drama uses different forms precisely because in human life, what we are and the way we live are two different facades of the same point. People are able to impose impressions on their friends and associates different from what they actually are. But this is not true in drama. Here the individual is what he lives for and the purpose of the drama is to reflect that fact and to bring about the meaning of life in terms of a fundamental change that constantly take place in the individual and which is cons-

tantly turned in the direction of his aspirations and his struggle for greatness.

I would like to stress this point in the drama especially that of the Americans. In modern drama we are dealing with problems related to modern life, with things which have happened recently. Before we found out all these things that can happen to us, we lived an entirely different existence. Today we have learned science, about the bacteria in the air that we breathe, about the peculiar elements in our personalities. We know, for example, that we have a subconscious mind that operates all the time when we are asleep and that our conscious mind operates on the fringe of the subconscious mind. These things have been revealed to us through modern science and so the drama of today is a different form from what it was a hundred years ago. The modern drama is compelled to reflect the changes that have taken place in our studies, in our science and in the industrialization of our big cities. Years ago, we have no big urban centers. Everybody lives in small communities. Modern drama must reflect these changes and capture new ideas brought about by progress.

When you watch a play by a man like Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller, you have to realize these revolutionary ideas. Dr. Serrano was telling me that some students in her classes were asking if all Americans are like the characters of Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner. These writers deal very depressingly with people enmeshed in abnormal problems. Reading them you have a feeling that life, after all, is something very close to the beast. But you must realize that the purpose of the playwright is not to try to make life terrible but merely to reflect the problems which modern individual has become aware of, the tremendous difficulties in our present life. Modern science has brought to us the awareness that life is a much more difficult thing to live than what it used to be. This does not mean that one should be depressed about it. It means that the character of the individual must strive much harder to overcome the difficulties of modern living. We will have to realize that in our modern psychology, we have an inclination towards temptations and many obstructing barriers which our ancestors have nothing to contend with. The drama constantly

brings these things to our attention and so when you watch a play and you find that the play reflects these characteristics, don't pay too much attention to the strange things the characters do and to the diseases they have been afflicted with. Pay more attention to the struggle the individual makes to overcome his difficulties. These are the secrets of modern life. You have to use new devices. You belong to a new generation that must confront the terror of a world of nuclear science. If we can live with the terrifying aspects of the atomic bomb, we must find in the atomic bomb a silver lining that calls for a nuclear world in which things will be done on a basis for the aspirations of mankind.

And so, I conclude my introduction to the drama with this statement: Drama always offers the individual this opportunity, the same kind of thing we have in our nuclear world. On one hand, utter destruction and the air filled with radio-active substances which would obliterate all forms of life. On the other hand, utter paradise on earth. Every human being is given a chance to live the life which is best fitted for him. Which will it be? The character in the drama is constantly making a choice between a world which offers him utter destruction and a world which offers him the chance of paradise on earth. The drama shows that the character can respond to the right choice in this matter if he has a strength of character, if he has the ability to endure, if he has an ability to keep his dream, his aspiration always before him.

So the next time you sit down to study your lesson and you are tempted to go out and play, please remember this thing: that in one and the same package, there is the destruction or fulfillment of man's aspirations. It is a choice that is determined by our ability to maintain this dramatic emphasis which I have tried to point out to you. You can not make this choice as drama proves by reaching out in one moment and touching the right answer. You can make this choice just as the drama was developed only by a gradual process of conditioning yourself for the right choice. Only by a gradual process of day-by-day making the correct choice in whatever dramatic situation is offered

to you and then over a period of weeks and months and years when the time comes for you to make a critical choice. The accumulated experiences of your aspirations and struggles will enable you to reach out and make the choice for a paradise on earth rather than for utter destruction.