

A play is not like a novel or a poem

This is a truism that needs to be repeated. Because the playwright must put his ideas for his play into so many words on paper, it is all too easy to read them as if they work like those in other books. A composer of music writes a notation for the sounds in his mind, but the fullness of the music is heard only in performance; so it is with drama. Once one is in the habit of reading a play as if it were, say, a story that is all dialogue, or a poem that is broken up for speaking, then habits of thinking, useful for discussing a novel or a poem, can be applied wrongly to drama.

A moment's thought about a few of the differences between a novel and a play, and between a poem and a play, will put us on guard against some of the obvious mistakes.

A novel can pause in its career while its author draws attention to some detail he is anxious the reader should not miss, or while he gives his reader direct information about the thoughts of a character; a play on the other hand can only work through visible actors and what we can hear them say and see them do. Thus, by description, a novelist can, if he wishes, present a character virtually whole on his first page, but the playwright through his actor can give us only so much at a time; and for the most part he must *demonstrate* it. This accounts for the delightful immediacy of drama.

In some plays, of course, we may infer that a situation or a character is full and complete offstage, just as we know there is a great deal more of an iceberg beneath the surface. The good producer and actor, and the student

too, test the quality of such a situation or character by exploring for what is not directly seen or heard. In the theatre an audience does this continuously, and this is one of the active pleasures of undergoing a play. Any detail the playwright wishes his audience to notice particularly, anything he wishes to 'tell' them, requires a special technique of 'signalling' into the auditorium. *These signals are being made all the time, and are the life of the play.*

A novel can move so freely and loosely in space and time that essentially space and time have not the same necessary importance as for the theatre; but physical space and actual time are the real and rigorous limitations of a play and its condition of working. Without them it could not be a play. An actor on his platform is alive in three dimensions, and, for however long he remains there, he must contribute also to our awareness of time, the fourth dimension. Furthermore, if great drama is achieved, these very limitations will have been turned into creative opportunities. The good playwright therefore practises his art with a strong sense of the economy the stage demands, making an ideal choice and arrangement of signals *imaginatively conceived in terms of particular space and time.*

A poem can convey its meaning to its reader even more directly than a novel. The poet selects and organizes words in patterns of sound, association and image; the reader for his part can linger his eye or his ear over the poem, reading it forwards and even backwards, making the pace of his reading exactly correspond with the needs of his own understanding, feeling and imagination. In a play, on the other hand, the good dramatist exactly controls the kind and intensity of our interest in the details of character and events on the stage. Moreover, he absolutely determines the sequence of the signals to the audience and always insists upon *a precise speed at which they are to be transmitted and received.*

The difference here is partly because the poet, like the novelist, thinks of his reader as an individual; the playwright must always think of an audience as a group. *Drama is a social activity; reading poetry is usually a private one.*

Of greatest importance is the fact that the poet can speak in his own voice, whereas the playwright must always translate his thoughts into terms of the theatre, splitting his mind into two or more minds, those of his characters, each with an individuality and life of his own. The poet speaks directly with the words, and these words are his poem; but the playwright's words are not his play. The playwright only speaks through his actors, who must in turn transform his words into signals of sight and sound to the spectators in the theatre. *Therefore the reader of a play must be ready to see and hear in his mind's eye and in his mind's ear.*

The essential differences may be summarized by diagrams, which are ones to return to regularly.

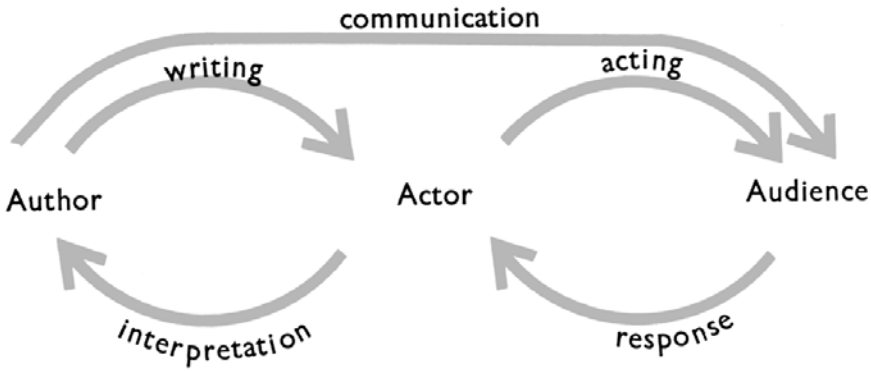


The NOVEL and POETRY



DRAMA

Lines of communication



A theatre experience is circular

The actor interprets and the audience responds: everyone contributes to the performance

The playwright's system of signals

As we sit in the theatre we willingly adjust our eyes and ears to receive a multiple barrage of impressions from the instant the curtain rises, each impression having been carefully prepared and transmitted at the right moment.

There will be times when elements of mime, purely visual motions provided by the actor, are doing much of the work: a gesture or a sudden cessation of gesture, the movement of one actor away from or towards another, a pace upstage or a pace downstage, will hold our complete attention and tell us what we have to know. Some of this mime may be done with the restraint of a person in ordinary life, or it may assume some of the qualities of dance: the larger gestures and movements of ballet will often seem fitting when the style of the play is very different from everyday life. But in all plays, one character set against another, or two set against three, the single figure downstage or the significant separation of a group

of characters upstage—such planning and composing of the stage picture must continuously change the image of the play the active spectator is creating within his mind.

There will be times when the actor's mask, or even his make-up, which after all is sometimes a form of mask, will illuminate the character the actor stands for. Perhaps his costume, its colour and its shape, will serve as a reminder of what he symbolizes, especially where it is set against, or is in harmony with, other costumes on the stage or the general décor of the scene. Perhaps the degree of brightness or shadow surrounding an actor will assist in forming or intensifying an impression. This is true also of the colour-tone of a scene, the colour of the lighting in conjunction with the colour of the décor and costuming.

For the most part, however, the voice of the actor, with all the great range of tone which the delicate human instrument can express, will be speaking to us: speech which ranges from the casual grunt and conversational idiom to the heightened artificiality of rhetorical poetry and lyrical song—operatic conventions are as permissible in a spoken play as in a musical play. A rush of speech, or a moment of complete silence, can make its point, just as can the introduction of music or other sound effects. And where there are two or more voices to be heard, we may expect a harmony or a counterpoint of tone and meaning to contribute to the play's richness.

The task of a reader is to feel *the cumulative impact of such impressions, controlled, like music, by a particular tempo*. These elements are mentioned, not only to suggest that drama is the most complicated of art forms, but also to remind us that many of them can be at work at the same time during a performance. Drama mixes the other arts with a fine disregard, calling at will upon ingredients which seem to belong to painting and sculpture, dance and music, poetry and the novel. We must be careful therefore not to think only of the last two in this astonishing list. Visual and aural, mimetic and verbal, all are facets of the one art of drama: reading the play, we dare not ignore this fact.

The next diagram invites you to piece out and then to juggle together those aspects of drama you can discover for yourself in the scene you are reading, and you will see that critics are justified in calling drama a truly composite art.



A way of looking at the ingredients of a play

Shakespeare's plays continually excite audiences because his own highly developed system of signals makes so many suggestions simultaneously. To take an example, *Macbeth* is an outstanding play if only because its signals are intense and full, and wholly capture our attention.

It is not easy to forget Macbeth on the point of going to King Duncan's room to murder him:

wither'd murther,
 Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth
 Hear not my steps, which way they walk . . .

Even in reading, the imagination is fired as the poetry vividly creates a living portrait of ‘murther’ and his wolf, both of whom the actor is in a sense enacting. Then in a flash of poetic association, the whole impression is transformed and reinforced by the mention of the loathsome Tarquinius who raped the virtuous Lucretia. By this the crime in Macbeth’s mind is immediately measured on a particular scale of evil.

Yet read again, and we *hear* the whisper in Macbeth’s voice sustained by a breathy hissing in the words; and we hear his screwed-up determination in the firm pressure of the metrical phrases. Listen again, and we *see* the crouch of the body, even the pain and ugliness in the face at ‘wither’d murther’. Is there an alertness in the eyes at ‘alarum’d’? Is there a gliding in the foot in the swing of the unstressed syllables which time Macbeth’s steps? We *hear and see* the hush and pause on the throaty word ‘ghost’, and sense his hesitation as he turns to the audience in the pit on ‘thou firm and sure-set earth’, inviting our collaboration in his villainy, compelling us to enter into his experience.

Now, with the mind’s eye, look again at the stage, that vast Elizabethan platform on which Macbeth is moving silently and alone. From the place close to us where he has just enacted the horror of killing, and impersonally evoked the atmosphere of brooding evil, he has a long journey to make to reach one of the upstage doors. This necessary progress of some forty feet (try this amazing distance for yourself) could have been for Shakespeare and his actor an embarrassment of space and time. But the dramatist uses this same distance, with its delay, to stretch our imagination, encouraging a powerful tension, while the lone actor’s movement is given time to make murderers and victims of us all.

As good readers of drama we acquire the key to the ‘code’ each dramatist adopts for his actors. Read the lines aloud, get on your feet if need be, and you receive an immediate invitation to enter the dramatist’s particular territory of make-believe: you begin to accept the experience



as real when you know it is unreal. We try to receive the *theatre experience* each dramatist offers, and this does not turn solely on the presence of a playhouse, a full-scale set and skilled actors, but on the intimate experience peculiar to dramatizing. This is one that is neither pretending, nor quite being. It is an experience in which part of oneself is surrendered that one may take a new shape born of the active imagination, a critical time when the human faculty of sharing the minds and feelings of others is wholly alive. However unpolished, the play becomes a physical and four-dimensional thing, and its language acquires the refreshing property of being *felt*.

Perhaps only a highly poetic language like that in *Macbeth* can provide a complete code for the actor and the audience?—poetry being as precise and concentrated a choice and arrangement of words as possible. Nevertheless, every playwright, whatever his playhouse and of whatever kind his play, must imply some such system, although of course he may not always be good at using it. Let us see what Congreve and Shaw do in Restoration and modern times. They are writing in prose, and quite colloquial prose too; but it is dramatic prose and it brings the stage alive.

Congreve writes for horizontal playing, with his actors in a line facing the audience like the figures in a sculptural frieze, not acting in depth as we find in Shakespeare; but the sense of direct contact with his audience is still very strong. Here is how the scintillating Millamant finally accepts Mirabell's famous proposal of marriage in *The Way of the World*. Mirabell is onstage, but she talks to Mistress Fainall, who serves as her confidante in this episode:

MILLAMANT. Fainall, what shall I do? Shall I have him? I think I must have him.

MRS FAINALL. Ay, ay, take him, take him, what shou'd you do?

MILLAMANT. Well then—I'll take my death I'm in a horrid fright—Fainall, I shall never say it—Well—I think—I'll endure you.

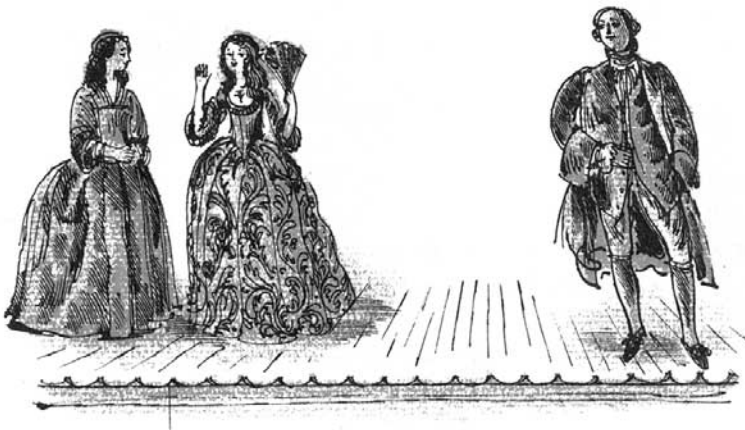
MRS FAINALL. Fy, fy, have him, have him, and tell him so in plain terms: for I am sure you have a mind to him.

MILLAMANT. Are you? I think I have—and the horrid man looks as if he thought so too—Well, you ridiculous thing you, I'll have you. . . .

This really does have to be spoken aloud, indeed mimed, before its full meaning is felt; and in this it has its own kind of poetry.

We cannot help noticing first that Millamant's lines are unmistakably written for an actress with arms and legs and a fan and the delightfully free and dancing costume of the period. In contrast with Mistress Fainall's insistent repetitions, 'take him, take him . . . have him, have him', which betoken a simple gesture from left or right of the stage and unchanging throughout the passage, Millamant's lines suggest many, many delicate movements of her head and neck, of her arms and fan, even to the point where she prods her lover in the ribs with it. Voice and body are one. We must see too that she stands centre-stage between Fainall and Mirabell, so that all her motions sway between these two, from side to side, retreating and advancing, motions not unlike those of a dancer.

There is another quality in this dialogue we should not miss. The curious arrangement of the sense apparently suggests that she is talking to Fainall for most of the time, but in point of fact her remarks are really thrown over her fan, working as it is at full flourish, to Mirabell: 'Shall I have him? I think I must have him.'



Yet again, a question intended for Mirabell like the ‘Shall I have him?’ is even more certainly addressed to the spectators at her feet, who indeed probably made an enthusiastic answer, for the interest in the outcome of Mirabell’s proposal reaches a peak of excitement at this point. And remarks like ‘I’ll take my death I’m in a horrid fright’ and ‘the horrid man looks as if he thought so too’ are unquestionably for the audience. How can we be sure? Because the irony of the whole piece rests upon our certain knowledge that Millamant is very much the mistress of the situation, that she is obviously in no fright at all, and that she can tease poor Mirabell to her heart’s content. We know that her remarks are a little joke with the audience at the expense of her wretched suitor’s feelings (that is, if *he* does not know it to be a joke too), and perhaps at the expense of all would-be bridegrooms.

This analysis may suggest some of the fun to be seen and heard in the dialogue; but has such a scene any *meaning*? It is indeed alive with dramatic meaning because it epitomizes one aspect of the commonest of sex relationships, the courtship, one in which, says Congreve, the fair sex finally holds all the cards. In another writer this scene could have been a tragedy for the man, and it is for Alceste in Molière’s comedy of *The Misanthrope*. In *The Way of the World* Congreve makes his points in a delightfully witty manner: they are light, but not necessarily therefore *slight*.

Such freedom of movement, such by-play of comment and aside with the audience, such insistent invitations to see and hear and be involved, are not readily found in more modern drama. The nineteenth-century playwright saw his play set back and framed between the two pillars of the proscenium arch, and his audience was invited to watch people from another world living in another room. Thus there is some justice in wondering whether the loss of contact with the spectator may not have destroyed his true participation in the play. Yet, however secluded his stage, the dramatist in any age who has a sense of the theatre may still use our faculties of sight and hearing to draw us into the play.