Play Analysis: A Casebook on Modern Western Drama

R. J. Cardullo

Play Analysis: A Casebook on Modern Western Drama is a combined play-analysis textbook and course companion that contains twelve essays on major dramas from the modern European and American theaters: among them, *Ghosts*, *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *A Man's a Man*, *The Homecoming*, *The Hairy Ape*, *The Front Page*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Our Town*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Death of a Salesman*. Supplementing these essays are a Step-by-Step Approach to Play Analysis, a Glossary of Dramatic Terms, Study Guides, Topics for Writing and Discussion, and bibliographies.

Written with college students in mind (and possibly also advanced high school students), these critical essays cover some of the central plays treated in courses on modern Euro-American drama and will provide students with practical models to help them improve their own writing and analytical skills. The author is a “close reader” committed to a detailed yet objective examination of the structure, style, imagery, and language of a play. Moreover, he is concerned chiefly with dramatic analysis that can be of benefit not only to playreaders and theatergoers, but also to directors, designers, and even actors—that is, with analysis of character, action, dialogue, and setting that can be translated into concepts for theatrical production, or that can at least provide the kind of understanding of a play with which a theater practitioner could fruitfully quarrel.
Play Analysis
A Play Analysis

A Casebook on Modern Western Drama

R. J. Cardullo
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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ANALYSIS

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

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

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

However we term our pursuit—theme, attitude, thought—we must not forget that it lies embedded in the work as a whole and that we perceive it from the experience
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of reading or seeing the play and analyzing that play as thoroughly as possible. But we must guard against making a drama a tract and against overemphasizing the specific verbal expressions of characters in the drama. Instead, we must attempt to make our apprehension of meaning consistent with the total action the play depicts. Therefore, if a statement by a character in the play is taken as the theme, it should be because that statement is a fair assessment of the entire direction of the drama.

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

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

Although the device of the *raisonneur* may be contrived, one must still formulate one’s experience of the play in words, and there may well be characters in plays who utter remarks that seem, to the reader or spectator, to sum up the essential meaning of the work. Some would find in Gloucester’s comment in *King Lear* (1606), “As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods. / They kill us for their sport,” an instance
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of Shakespeare’s expressing his own convictions. This may be the case. However, the test lies not so much in determining which (if any) character is the spokesperson, as in determining whether the action of the play bears out the alleged summation. In *King Lear*, it is not Gloucester’s saying it that constitutes the most important argument for the truth of his comparison (indeed, his saying it might argue against its truth), but the belief that this sentiment adequately conveys the central idea of the drama as the action reveals it. Were we to seek a spokesperson as such, Gloucester’s son Edgar would serve much better. He is a sympathetic character who, among other things, remains loyal while others are shedding old loyalties, and who leads his father to self-understanding despite his father’s rejection of him. Because of Edgar’s character and conduct, what he says is likely to be of consequence in the play. Nevertheless, the true test is still whether his words are borne out by the total action of the play.

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

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

In a play as rich as *King Lear*, we perhaps cannot expect to find a spokesman to sum up all that Shakespeare wanted the play to contain. Nor need we feel that single line or two from any one character must be found. Certainly, though, some of the
major issues of the drama are powerfully evoked by the lines cited above, and they can at least form the basis for an intelligent and thoughtful examination of the play’s meaning. If the one's analysis leads to such an examination, one will be justified in believing that analysis has been worthwhile. In the end, the statement of a play's meaning, the result of thorough analysis and careful interpretation, comes very close to answering the deceptively simple question with which one begins the reading of any drama: “What is it all about?”

AIDS IN INTERPRETATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

A NOTE ON ORGANIZATION

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

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

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

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

I. Analysis of Plot and Action

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

II. Analysis of Character

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

III. Analysis of Language

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

e. What are the most notable moments or statements in this dialogue?
f. Are there any implicit or unspoken matters in this scene that deserve attention?
g. What facial expressions, physical gestures, or bodily movements are implied by the dialogue?
h. What props or set pieces are explicitly or implicitly called for in the dialogue or the stage directions?
i. Where might the characters increase or decrease the volume or speed of their delivery?
j. Where might the characters pause in delivering their lines?
k. Where might the characters stand on stage and in relation to each other at the beginning of the scene and at later points in the same scene?

2. Do all the characters use language in much the same way, or does each have his or her own verbal characteristics?

3. What are the dominant image patterns? (For instance, disease-decay-death imagery in Hamlet.) Do characters seem to share a particular pattern, or is it exclusive to one character? (For example, Othello gradually begins to pick up Iago’s sexual-bestial imagery as he becomes more convinced of Desdemona’s guilt.)

4. What combinations or conflations of image patterns can you detect? (For instance, in Hamlet, in the lines “By the o’ergrowth of some complexion, / Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,” the imagery of cancer, or pollution by “overgrowth,” is conflated with military imagery.)

5. Explain the presence of such rhetorical devices as: sudden shifts from verse to prose; rhymed couplets; “set” speeches that give the appearance of being standard or conventional (Polonius’s advice to Laertes in Hamlet); choral speeches; formal “debates”; etc. These devices are often used to emphasize, or italicize, certain aspects of meaning and theme.

6. How, generally, would you distinguish the use of language and imagery in this play from that of other plays? (For example, dramatic verse speech tends, on the whole, to “recite” the content directly and faithfully, presenting all the implications on the word-surface; as dialogue in plays becomes more realistic—becomes prose, that is—particularly from the nineteenth century forward, there is an increasing rift between what is actually said and what is implied, or latent, in the language.)

7. In what ways does the language of the play—its imagery; style; tempo or rhythm; tone; descriptive, informational, or ideational content; and level of probability or internal consistency—help to create the sense of a unique “world,” or circumscribed space, appropriate to this play and no other? (For instance, Macbeth’s dark, “metaphysical” space versus Hamlet’s dense and various world of objects, people, animals, and processes.)

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IV. General

1. What is the dramatist’s attitude toward the materials of his or her play? (Skeptical? Critical? Ironic? Sympathetic? Neutral or objective? Etc.)

2. What features or elements of the play seem to be the source of the dramatist’s attitude? (A reasonable or reasoning character you can trust? A choral element? A didactic voice detectable in the content as a whole? An allegorical quality? The way in which the incidents are arranged? A set of symbols? A balance or equilibrium of opposed readings of the world?)

3. What is the nature of the play’s world order? (Fatalistic? Benign? Malignant? Just? Neutral?) Another way of asking this: Are there operative gods, and what share of the responsibility for events do they hold?

4. What is the source of your impression of this world order? Remember that meaning in drama is usually implied, rather than stated directly. It is suggested by the relationships among the characters; the ideas associated with unsympathetic and sympathetic characters; the conflicts and their resolution; and such devices as spectacle, music, and song. What, then, is the source of your impression of the play’s meaning?

5. If the play departs from realism or representationalism, what devices are used to establish the internal logic of the action?

6. Are changes in the dramatic action paralleled by changes in visual elements such as lighting, costume, make-up, and scenery? How important is such visual detail to the dramatic action?

7. For what kind of theatrical space was the play intended by its author? Are some of the play’s characteristics the result of dramatic conventions in use at the time the work was written?

8. How extensive are the stage directions? Were they written by the author or interpolated by someone else? What type of information do they convey? Are they important to the dramatic action?

9. Is the play a translation? Can you compare it to the original? Can you compare it with other translations? Are there significant differences between the source and a translation, such as the rendering of the author’s original French verse in English prose?

10. Is there any difference between playing time (the time it takes to perform the play) and illusory time (the time the action is supposed to take)? What is the relationship between the two, if any?

11. Is there anything special about the title? Does it focus on a character, the setting, or a theme? Is it taken from a quotation or is it an allusion? Does the title contain a point of view, suggest a mood, or otherwise “organize” the action of the play?

12. Does the play clearly fall into one of the major dramatic categories (tragedy, comedy, etc.)? What conventional features of its type does the play exhibit (subject matter, situations, character types)? Does knowledge of the genre contribute to an understanding of this play?
PART 1

PLOT AND ACTION, OR FORM
AND STRUCTURE

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

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

Osvald has in fact been gradually assuming his symbolic role throughout the play as his own paralysis of the brain has been growing, or getting ready to strike, and his function as symbol at the end of *Ghosts* is the key to a fuller, richer interpretation of the play. Ibsen identifies his play with Osvald; that Osvald is an artist who can no longer paint should have tipped critics off to this long ago. Osvald’s paralysis does not simply destroy Mrs. Alving’s son, some virtual nonentity from abroad, but, Ibsen leads us to believe, an artist of great promise. I do not believe that the play is intended primarily as Mrs. Alving’s tragedy, and I think that Ibsen made this clear by ending the play the way he did—without having Mrs. Alving poison, or not poison Osvald with morphine and then depicting the aftermath. To my knowledge, no critic has
ever asked why specifically Ibsen ended *Ghosts* precisely at Mrs. Alving’s moment of decision and did not show what that decision was. Most critics, of course, take the play, for better or for worse, as Helene Alving’s tragedy, or as a simple drama of social protest and reform. They ignore, or are simply unaffected by the “formal” meaning of *Ghosts*’ ending and concentrate instead on what has led up to it or what, they believe, will, or should have come after it.

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

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

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

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

Let me illustrate this through the example of the very last moments in the play. Had the play continued, emphasis would have fallen on Mrs. Alving’s state after the poisoning, or after her avoidance of it. By ending *Ghosts* at Mrs. Alving’s moment of decision and by not showing what that decision is, Ibsen places emphasis on the object or symbol to be or not to be poisoned, and on whether it will be poisoned, not on the subject who will or will not do the poisoning. This is one of the reasons he has Mrs. Alving “paralyzed with fear” and “in speechless terror”5 at the end: he nearly equates her condition here with Osvald’s, so that, again, emphasis will fall on
whether the paralysis is destroyed or lives on. To Mrs. Alving, whether Osvald lives or dies, whether she poisons him with morphine or not, is a matter of real, of real-life importance. It is of such importance to no one else in the play: Pastor Manders, Engstrand, and Regine have all gone to look out for themselves. But to Ibsen, to us, and to the form of the play, whether Osvald lives or dies is a matter of symbolic, of extra importance, since he is already both alive and “dead” in his present vegetative state, and since we clearly cannot feel for him as his mother does, however little she could be said to know him. Ibsen is not so much interested here in Mrs. Alving’s reaction to Osvald as in our own reaction to his play as form.

The real focus of the play from an aesthetic point of view, then, is Osvald, not Mrs. Alving. She is the “interest” in the play, along with, to a lesser degree, the other characters. At her most neutral, arousing curiosity about herself, it is her job to deflect attention away from Osvald, to absorb our interest, until it is time for her son—literally kept in the shadows for much of the play—to take over as almost pure symbol, as container of the play. Bert O. States would call her part of the verisimilitude or “environment” of the play. His comments on dramatic form in general and verisimilitude’s place in it are of special relevance here:

One might define a good drama … as one which produces a maximum reversal with minimum improbability. Thus, in the dynamics of drama, the function of verisimilitude, or (if you will) environment, is to act as a viscous medium which impedes the runaway energies of the reversal mechanism. Reversal is under much the same environmental restraint as the mainspring of a watch: without the escapement mechanism, which forces it to unwind in an orderly way, the spring would spend its energy in a single discharge. Put simply, the principle of escapement is inherent in the total environment of a play (including supporting characters, social structures, accidents, etc.), and what I mean by minimum improbability is simply the resistance which this environment, behaving “according to nature,” offers to the reflexive drive aesthetically imposed on the play’s world.6

Now some would say that, indeed, a maximum reversal does occur in Ghosts, and that it occurs through the character of Mrs. Alving, the main character. But this ignores the fact that Ibsen never completes Mrs. Alving’s reversal; he does not show her finally at rest with the knowledge of herself and her past that she has attained in the course of the play. Indeed, it is never clear that she accepts this knowledge: she is beside herself with fear and disbelief from the moment Osvald reveals to her that his illness is hereditary and without cure, until the end of the play. Francis Fergusson thinks that this is Ghosts’ flaw; I think that it is the play’s strategy. Ibsen cuts short Mrs. Alving’s reversal at the very moment Osvald’s reversal is complete, and he has been waiting on Osvald’s reversal throughout the play. Following the model of the well-made play, Ibsen thus makes Mrs. Alving’s reversal really a reversal in her fortunes as opposed to a reversal in her recognition or perception of her situation, since we never see this recognition or perception. Osvald’s reversal is that of the
nightmare or dream, and Osvald’s last moments onstage are like a poem to the well-made play that has preceded them. They give us the image of a paralyzed Osvald, and it is on this image that the play closes, in a state of lyric rest as opposed to dramatic unwinding, one could say.

Osvald’s reversal—“the reflexive drive aesthetically imposed on the play’s world”—is from entrance into the play as the symbol of freedom and enlightened thinking to exit from it as the symbol of paralysis of thought and action. Because this is an extreme reversal, Ibsen keeps Mrs. Alving’s reversal in step with Osvald’s throughout the play, only to arrest hers at the moment of truth. This is a dramatic strategy, designed to reinforce the function of Osvald and lend it credibility. Mrs. Alving’s attainment or falling short of nobility at the end of the play is less important to Ibsen than the point, made through the now symbolic presence of Osvald, that what happened to the Alvings may, or may not, happen again to others. Mrs. Alving may poison Osvald, or she may not. Osvald, now the symbol of the kind of paralysis of the mind—narrowmindedness, stubbornness, plain stupidity in society—that drove his mother to marry Captain Alving (for wealth and position) instead of Pastor Manders in the first place, may live, or he may die. The paralysis may live on in men, or it may die. Ibsen’s ambivalence is tantalizing and suggests that it is not entirely up to him, nor entirely up to us. This is not didacticism, not reform, nor is it pessimism or optimism. It bespeaks the intermingling of fate, chance, environment, and free will, of forces both beyond our control and within our control, in the determination of all our lives. The ending of *Ghosts* contains a very delicate balance, but a balance nonetheless.

* * *

In order to understand the full power of *Ghosts*’ poetic structure, let us see exactly how Ibsen gets Osvald to the position he is in by the end of the play. I said above that Osvald’s reversal was of the nightmare or dream, whereas Mrs. Alving’s was of the well-made play. By this I meant that his reversal from lucidity to imbecility has about it the quality of a dream; it occurs with the suddenness and unpredictability with which images or symbols are produced in dreams. This is so despite all the preparing for this moment Ibsen has done: we simply are never prepared to watch someone go instantly from the normal human state to complete helplessness. If we do witness such an occurrence, we feel as if we are dreaming; we feel suddenly removed from reality. As Osvald is having his final, paralyzing attack, Mrs. Alving says, “This has all been a nightmare, Osvald—just something you’ve imagined” (152). Day is breaking as she speaks: the nightmare is over. But what is suggested is that Osvald’s attack is a nightmare, or dream, that he has been having throughout the play and from which he now “awakens,” his brain paralyzed. It is as if the deteriorating Osvald has been having a dream, that is, since everything is so unbelievable to him—the way people live in his hometown, the revelations about his father. I hope it is clear that I am not trying to make a case here for *Ghosts* as a “dream play.” Obviously, it is not
one. Osvald does not dream the play; rather, the realistic action of the well-made play strikes him with the unreality of a dream.

And it is precisely the well-made play that Ibsen, through Osvald, is trying to transcend in Ghosts. Ibsen the artist, the poet, transcends the well-made form, the form that “can no longer paint,” if you will, the form that is a reflection of the traditional, “well-made”—“paralyzed”—society he himself inhabited. This is the selfsame society whose attitudes and beliefs paved the way for the destruction of Osvald, and with him of an artist. Ibsen gets the well-made form to participate in its own calling to account, even trumping, through the controlling presence of Osvald and the at once innovative and disingenuous devices of realism. Thus we get the break between well-made form and what I would call the life of poetry and symbol at the end of the play, between Osvald’s line, “Thank you, Mother” (152), and the breaking of day. The well-made form deteriorates once Osvald’s mind deteriorates.

It is the well-made form, society, that originally produced Osvald, and it is he who lays that form to rest. This is the overriding action of the play, what Osvald “does,” what Ibsen does for Osvald, how he “loves” him, to borrow Robert B. Heilman’s usage of the word.” Osvald’s release is into complete mental paralysis, and the suggestion is that this is preferable to complete mental alertness (or what passes for it) in a “paralyzed” society. The play’s release is into mockery of the well-made form’s “paralysis”: the frozen moment, the tableau ripe with possibility. Osvald, who can no longer paint, becomes a figure in the “painting” that would make way for the “joy of life” (136) he was always talking about. The sunshine is there. And the “glowing happy faces” (136) might at least be our own, just beyond the “frame,” if not those of the figures themselves.

There is strong evidence that Ibsen places a well-made play inside a dream structure—or a structure that keeps Osvald “in mind,” that has him as its focus or concern—in order to subvert the well-made-play structure even as he uses it and thereby stress Osvald’s poetic importance as symbol. Although all the action before the final moments is not seen from Osvald’s point of view, as it would be in a dream play, he does provide a kind of frame for the action. It is his presence in the Alving home that motivates all the action and supplies Ibsen’s reason for beginning the play when he does. Ghosts opens with Osvald asleep upstairs, controlling the volume of Regine and Engstrand’s conversation and lending to its incredibility, since none of the three is aware that Regine is actually Osvald’s half sister and that Captain Alving is Regine’s real father. Ghosts closes with the “death” of Osvald’s mind.

Then there is Osvald’s presence right outside or around scenes when he is thought to be outside and away, taking a walk or attending the fire at the Orphanage. The characters onstage are unaware of his presence; like a figure in a dream, he may appear to be in two places at once, or he may suddenly appear in one place when he was thought to be in another. It is noteworthy that no one “discovers” Osvald, that no one comes upon him; this is one of the ways in which Ibsen makes him the poetic focus or force of the play. Osvald has four entrances in Ghosts, each one onto
a scene. One time Regine does come upon him and his mother (Act II, 132), but only because Mrs. Alving has rung for her, and Ibsen gives Regine four more quick entrances after this in order to play down the significance of her first entrance. So too does Pastor Manders come upon Osvald, his mother, and Regine, but, significantly, Osvald hears him coming: he is waiting for him. And when Mrs. Alving herself has the chance to come upon Osvald right after he has returned from a supposed walk, she does not do so. Structurally, the play cannot let her. She hears Regine resisting Osvald’s advances in the dining room at the end of Act I, and she could go in and break them up (just by her presence) without revealing their true relationship to each other, but her emotional state, and the state of the play, prevent her from acting.

During his supposed walk in Act I, Osvald may be right outside or around the scene between his mother and Pastor Manders. Whereas he had his coat on and his hat in his hand for the entirety of his first scene onstage (right before he leaves for his walk), he returns from his walk without his hat and coat! This may not appear very remarkable on the surface—he could have left a wet hat and coat in another room—but it becomes so when one considers that his entrance with the information that “dinner’s nearly ready” (112) is followed immediately by Regine’s with the same information and with the parcel of songs for the Orphanage dedication ceremony. Has Osvald been right outside the garden room all along, perhaps with Regine the whole time, and has he decided to break in on Manders and Mrs. Alving because it is nearly dinnertime and he is hungry (Ibsen makes much of Osvald’s appetite for his mother’s food)? Has he been without hat and coat, inside the house, for as long as he was with hat and coat during his first scene, with Manders and his mother? His immediately intimate responses to Regine when she comes in to announce dinner, and his quick advances on her once they are behind a closed door again for a moment, strongly suggest that they are continuing something begun just previously, right outside the garden room. Regine’s line, “Osvald!—Are you mad?—Let me go!” (113), especially suggests this. Regine is not resisting Osvald here; she is not expressing a lack of interest in him (only to be ready to go to Paris with him as his wife in Act II). She is telling him that he is crazy to be embracing her now, with his mother and the pastor close by and about to come in to dinner—not so unusual a reaction for a woman of any era.

At the beginning of Act II, Osvald says that he is going out for a walk again. In a brilliant theatrical stroke, Ibsen has him say this from offstage, in the dining room, where, we will learn later, he remains for all of the subsequent conversation between Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving, and after that between Manders and Engstrand. Regine then answers Mrs. Alving from the same dining room that she will go down to the laundry and help with the wreaths. We do not learn if she does this, but we can guess that, even if she does, she comes back to the dining room to be with Osvald (her next entrance is from the dining room), thus connecting this “walk” of Osvald’s with his first one. In other words, during both “walks,” he spends at least some of his time offstage, in the house, with Regine.
One other factor connects these two “walks” with each other. When Mrs. Alving discovers, after Manders and Engstrand have left, that Osvald has been in the dining room all along, she asks him why he did not go out for his walk. He replies, “In this kind of weather?” (127). The implication is that if he would not go out “in this kind of weather” after dinner, he would not have gone out in it right before dinner (or he would have gone out only for a moment; he would have gotten just past the door before returning).

Mrs. Alving carries on a conversation of thirteen lines at this point with an Osvald who is offstage. There is a realistic reason for this: Osvald is smoking a cigar, which is not allowed in the garden room. But the conversation goes on for so long—we got our first taste of it at the beginning of the act, remember—that we are left with this haunting image of Osvald just beyond the “frame,” overseeing the action. Mrs. Alving senses Osvald’s presence in the dining room once she is alone, but, again, she does not come upon him: she does not go into the dining room to see if he is there. She calls out, and he replies.

Mrs. Alving senses Osvald’s presence in this way at two other times. She hears him coming upon his first entrance in the play (he has been asleep), and he enters, without comment from her, looking exactly like his father—as one might be oneself but look like someone or something else in a dream. Mrs. Alving goes to meet Osvald when he returns from the fire at the Orphanage, and, to judge from Ibsen’s stage direction, it is as if she were going to meet him before she had evidence he was coming; it is as if she knew instinctively, as the figures in a dream are wont to do, that he would appear when he did, when the “dream” produced him. Even though Osvald has been at the fire, Mrs. Alving’s going to meet him in the way she does thus makes it appear that he has been right outside the garden room, in the garden, all along. When, toward the end of the play, Osvald goes into the offstage hallway outside the garden room in order to lock the door of the Alving home, it is as if he is sealing himself into the nightmare that his life has become—the nightmare from which his only “escape,” very shortly, will be complete paralysis of the mind.

* * *

Perhaps the most startling evidence for Ibsen’s subversion of a well-made-play structure through a dream structure is to be found at moments in the play that other critics have faulted for their unbelievability. I am thinking particularly of Pastor Manders’ failure early in Act III to ask Engstrand why, if he saw the beginnings of a fire at the Orphanage, he did not do something immediately, and of Osvald’s and Regine’s instantaneous assimilation of the fact that they—two people who might have married—are half brother and half sister, also in Act III.

Many have faulted _Ghosts_ for letting Engstrand, Regine, and Pastor Manders “get away,” for not including these characters more in _Mrs. Alving’s_ tragedy. It is said that they are disposed of too quickly and easily as excess baggage in this well-made play’s headlong drive to completion. But a close reading of the text shows that
the three of them are very much included in the poetic structure that makes *Ghosts* a tragedy of “two or more men.” Just as Osvald is the symbol of paralysis that Mrs. Alving will destroy or not destroy, so too is “Captain Alving’s Haven” (142)—Engstrand’s proposed “home for poor seamen” (142) that will be nothing more than a brothel—a symbol of the same kind of paralysis infecting the Norwegian society of the time, and likewise a symbol that Engstrand, Regine, and Manders will destroy or not destroy. Ibsen has planted the clues, and they fairly leap out at us once the grand strategy of the play is discerned.

Osvald is linked with Captain Alving’s Haven as symbol on three counts. First, Osvald has come home in time for the ceremony celebrating the completion of the Orphanage to Captain Alving’s memory, and the Haven is Engstrand’s answer to the Orphanage that he himself burns down. Second, it was Captain Alving’s whoring—“the sins of the father”—that led in the first place to Osvald’s contracting of paresis, and in Captain Alving’s memory, appropriately, a brothel is going to be erected, where future Captain Alvings will become diseased and produce their own diseased Osvalds. Third, Regine is the offspring of the Captain’s sexual relations with Johanna, his servant and Engstrand’s future wife. That is, Regine is as much the product of the Captain’s whoring, she is as much associated in our minds with the disease, as she is Osvald’s true half sister. In fact, she has some of the whore in her, too, as she herself says: “I take after my mother, I suppose” (146); she might have added that she may be taking up work in Engstrand’s brothel soon.

It is easy to assume that “after” *Ghosts*, Engstrand gets his brothel, Manders keeps his reputation un tarnished, and Regine begins her descent into a life of prostitution. In a word, that Ibsen loses control over these characters’ fates, which then run wild toward their most negative capability. But this assumption is based almost entirely on one piece of evidence and virtually ignores Regine’s place in the dealings of Engstrand and Manders. Early in Act III, Engstrand blames the fire at the Orphanage on Manders, saying, “I saw you snuff one of the candles and throw the bit of wick right into a pile of shavings!” (140). Manders takes Engstrand at his word for the moment, even though he swears he “never went near the lights” (140) and claims that he is “not in the habit of snuffing candles with [his] fingers” (140) anyway. Engstrand has Manders where he wants him: he offers to take the blame for Manders so that the newspapers won’t attack the pastor, and in return Manders will see that Engstrand gets the funds for his “Seamen’s Home” (89).

As far as I know, no one has ever disputed that this is exactly what happens. I say above that Manders takes Engstrand at his word for the moment, however, because if Manders is in the least questioning and analytical—and he has these traits where his own interests are concerned; he is an intelligent man for all his narrowmindedness—then he is soon going to be asking Engstrand why he didn’t say something if he saw the pastor throwing a piece of candlewick into a pile of shavings, or why Engstrand didn’t make sure that the shavings would not catch fire. This seems rather obvious to me, yet critics have persisted over the years in pointing to Manders’ quick capitulation to Engstrand as a striking flaw in the play.
I prefer to see the capitulation as a mistake (made in the heat of the moment: nothing so improbable) that Manders may, or may not, rectify. (Engstrand, sly dog that he is, may have a very good explanation ready for Manders.) Once again, a symbol of paralysis, here Captain Alving’s Haven, may, or may not, be destroyed—that is, lose the funds Manders had promised for its construction.

Even if Manders never thinks to question why Engstrand didn’t do anything about the piece of candlewick thrown into the pile of shavings, Regine will be along at any moment to do a bit of questioning and answering herself. She knows now that Captain Alving was her real father, and so does Manders. Engstrand does not know about her real paternity, and Manders does not know that Regine knows about it. Regine has probably figured out by the end of the play that Engstrand himself set the fire at the Orphanage. (Engstrand’s aside to her, “We’ve hooked the old fool now, my girl!”, at the start of Act III [139] should have set her to thinking.) Manders doesn’t know that Engstrand is the real arsonist. Regine wants some of the money that Manders has said he will find for the construction of Captain Alving’s Haven (the money will come from the interest on the capital Mrs. Alving had laid aside for the building and administration of the Orphanage), for she wants to lead the kind of life “suited to a gentleman’s daughter” (146). What she will do to get that money is play Engstrand against Manders with the knowledge she has that each man does not have. Regine reveals this in the following exchange with Mrs. Alving just before the former leaves the Alving household for good:

REGINE. … —May I ask, Mrs. Alving, if Mr. Manders knows this? [that Regine is really the daughter of Captain Alving and Johanna Engstrand].

MRS. ALVING. Mr. Manders knows everything.

REGINE. (Rapidly putting on her shawl) Then I’d better try and catch that boat. Mr. Manders is such a kind man, he’s sure to help me. It seems to me I have a right to some of that money too—a better right than that filthy old carpenter. (146)

Regine can do a lot to embarrass Pastor Manders if she makes public her true father’s name and Manders’ knowledge of the illicit relationship between the Captain and Johanna Engstrand (when the pastor received this knowledge will have become beside the point). Regine can, of course, ruin Engstrand if she tells Manders that it was really Engstrand who started the fire at the Orphanage. She can blackmail either man (or both at the same time) to get something of what she wants, and Captain Alving’s Haven can still see the light of day. But if she decides to pursue her “better right” to the money—and her line, “What do I care?” (147), in response to Mrs. Alving’s warning to be careful, tells us she might go this far—that is, if she decides to expose Engstrand completely at the same time that she holds the truth about her paternity over Manders’ head, she may undo herself, Engstrand, and Manders. The reason for this is that even if the money is there to be handed over in full to her, she won’t have it for long before the newspapers have her (and Manders). Captain
Alving’s Haven will never see the light of day in this case. Our symbol of paralysis will have been put to rest. Or it will have been allowed to live. The decision is Regine’s. Or it is Pastor Manders’. Ghosts is indeed a tragedy of “two or more men,” and that tragedy is completed. No one escapes, yet no one has simply been disposed of. Everything hangs in the balance, forever waiting for them, forever waiting for us. This is the charity, and hope, of the play.

All of Ghosts can be seen, then, as an attempt by Ibsen to elaborate the right image or symbol for the tragic paralysis of mind in Norwegian society. Captain Alving’s Haven and Osvald are highlighted, finally, as twin symbols for that paralysis through Ibsen’s subversion of the well-made form by means of a dream structure, and through his arresting of the action before Mrs. Alving, Manders, Regine, and Engstrand experience any reversal in their perception of the overall situation. Thus Manders’ failure to ask Engstrand why he did not take action immediately if he saw the beginnings of a fire at the Orphanage, and Osvald’s and Regine’s instantaneous assimilation of the fact that they are half brother and half sister, can be viewed as examples of Ibsen’s dream structure at work. Manders’, Osvald’s, and Regine’s actions could occur in a dream and not be thought of by the dreamer as unrealistic or unbelievable, for dreams are not preoccupied with realism or believability. But the well-made play is so preoccupied, and it would be concerned with making the actions of Manders, Osvald, and Regine credible.

Although a case can be made for Manders’ behavior on realistic grounds, it could also be argued that Ibsen’s lack of concern with making Manders’, and Osvald’s and Regine’s, actions believable was intentional: he wanted to subvert the well-made play; to call attention to his departures from it and thus give its action even more of the very quality of unreality that it has for its primary “dreamer,” Osvald; and in this way to direct the spectator to the imminent ascent of poetic symbol in Ghosts. Like Manders, Osvald, and Regine, Mrs. Alving herself is included in the dream structure of Ghosts: what happens, happens so suddenly and irreversibly that it seems like a dream to her. But we leave Mrs. Alving on the verge of her “awakening.” Osvald is “asleep” forever; the woman “sleeping” next to him, however, who has been “asleep” for most of her life, is about to “wake up” and do something. At the end of Ghosts, it could be said, Mrs. Alving’s life, and the true life of the play, begin.

* * *

Ghosts owes its permanence, finally, less to realism as a dramatic movement and the analytical method of characterization than to Ibsen’s permanent concerns, expressed most cogently through his manipulation of structure to create poetic symbol.11 Unfortunately, the play has tended to be interpreted along the paths of least resistance: the narrowest path of social drama, or the unchallenging one of failed tragedy. But Ibsen put a lot into Ghosts, and it is on the broader, or more abstract, grounds that the play points in so many directions while leading in only one, that it is so highly imaginative while yet so simple, that I am making my case for it as great dramatic art.
THE FORM THAT ‘CAN LONGER PAINT’

NOTES


3 Fergusson, 150.

4 Fergusson, 150.

5 Henrik Ibsen, Ghosts, trans. Eva Le Gallienne, in Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1957), 153 (both quotations). All subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses after each quotation.


8 Significantly, Osvald has come home to Norway in the first place to suffer the attack that will result in the paralysis of his brain. He tells his mother late in Act III,

   I had one attack while I was abroad [in Paris]—it didn’t last long. But when I realized the condition I’d been in, I was filled with unspeakable terror—and I could think of nothing but getting home to you. … I recovered from that attack abroad—but the doctor said that the next time—and there’s bound to be a “next time”—it would be hopeless. (150–151)

9 Paresis is a disease of the brain caused by syphilis of the central nervous system and characterized by inflammation of the meninges, dementia, paralytic attacks, etc.


11 What I am saying about Ghosts could also be said about Hedda Gabler (1890), for example. Osvald must live and Osvald must die at the end of Ghosts, the possibility that he may or may not be poisoned must be left open, for the same reason that Hedda must die and Lovborg’s manuscript must live at the end of Hedda Gabler. Hedda’s ideal (to live beautifully, free from the constraints of her socialization) dies with her, but Lovborg’s ideal (a book on the future of civilization, in which he frees himself, and potentially others, from the poisonous constraints of society by writing a prescription for that society’s health or liberation) lives—it is reconstructed from notes by Tesman and Thea. Hedda kills herself with child; Lovborg and Thea speak of the manuscript as their “child.” Hedda dies to achieve the ideal she could not achieve in life; Lovborg kills himself (or is killed in a mistaken attempt to retrieve his manuscript from “Mademoiselle Diana’s boudoir”) because he felt he had achieved, or helped to make possible, the ideal through his book and then senselessly lost the manuscript.

In the same way as Osvald’s paralysis of mind could be said to be growing throughout Ghosts, to turn him at the end into a symbol of the paralysis of mind of Norwegian society, so too could the notes for Lovborg’s book that Thea produces in Hedda Gabler be said to have been “growing” throughout the play, to be given birth at the end as a symbol of hope for the future of civilization. Thea and Lovborg had spoken of the manuscript as their “child,” as I mention above, and thus it is no accident that Thea “nurture[s]” these notes in the pocket of her dress throughout the play (she says at one point, “Yes. I took them with me when I left home—they’re here in my pocket—” [Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen, trans. Le Gallienne, 422]), to produce them at the right moment for reassembly by herself and Tesman.

In the same way that Ibsen leads us to believe that in Osvald an artist of great promise is ultimately destroyed by the paralysis of mind of his society, so too does the playwright lead us to believe that in Hedda a person of potential creativity is destroyed by her upbringing as the daughter of the aristocratic General Gabler. Martin Esslin writes that

   [Hedda’s] sense of social superiority prevents her from realizing her genuine superiority as a potential creative personality. If the standards prescribed by the laws of nobilesse oblige
had not prevented her from breaking out into the freedom of moral and social emancipation, she might have been able to turn her passionate desire for beauty (which is the hallmark of real, spiritual, as distinct from social, aristocracy) to the creation of beauty, living beauty rather than merely a beautiful death. It is the creative energy, frustrated and damned up, that is finally converted into the malice and envy, the destructive rage, the intellectual dishonesty that lead to Hedda Gabler’s downfall. ("Ibsen,” in Esslin’s Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969], 39.)

Like Osvald, Hedda is a potential artist. Like Mrs. Alving, she has no true moment of recognition or perception: Ibsen is interested at the end more in whether Lovborg’s ideal will be promulgated, to the benefit of future Heddas.

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TEDDY. It’s a way of being able to look at the world. It’s a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it’s a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two, to balance the two. To see, to be able to see! I’m the one who can see. … [my ellipsis] Might do you good … [my ellipsis] to see how certain people can view … things … how certain people can maintain … intellectual equilibrium … [my ellipsis] You’re just objects. You just … move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It’s the same as I do. But you’re lost in it. You won’t get me being … I won’t be lost in it.¹

Teddy is speaking to his father, Max, and his two brothers, Lenny and Joey, after his wife, Ruth, has danced suggestively with Lenny and “necked” with Joey on the couch. What Teddy means is that his father and brothers do not have a perspective on their lives, as he has on those same lives; they cannot see themselves, look at themselves from afar. They cannot do so partly because each has had an occupation on the outside that, in its own way, has been as violent as his life inside the home. Max owned a butcher shop, Lenny is a brutal pimp, and Joey is a demolitions worker by day and an aspiring boxer by night. The three will soon ask Ruth to remain with them as their mother-whore instead of returning to America with Teddy. They will compete for her affections, ask her to sell her body to others, and continue the pattern of insulting and threatening one another. For all his perspective on events—perhaps because of it—Teddy has been unable or unwilling to deter Ruth, his brothers, or his father. They engage in life, however distasteful one might find their kind of engagement; he remains at a distance, disengaged and ineffectual.

It is Ruth who asks Teddy if his family has ever read his “critical works” (62)—to which he refers in the passage quoted at the start of this essay—and it is as if she knows how he’ll respond: by separating himself from her as well as his family. But after he has given his speech about his works, and while Ruth is upstairs in bed with Joey, Teddy admits to Lenny that he deliberately ate the latter’s cheese-roll. Teddy says, “I saw you put it [in the sideboard]. I was hungry, so I ate it” (64). This is one of two instances in the play in which he acts like everyone else in his family, like an “object,” simply taking what he wants without regard for the rights of others. Perhaps Teddy steals the cheese-roll because his brothers have stolen his wife, thus
momentarily reducing himself to their level, or placing Ruth on the same level with a cheese-roll—as an object to be devoured.

At the end of *The Homecoming* (1965), right before he leaves, Teddy again acts like an “object.” Sam, his uncle, with whom he has a good relationship, “croaks and collapses” (78). Sam is not dead, yet no one does anything to help him, not even Teddy. Max, Lenny, and Joey are more interested in whether Ruth will really be remaining with them as mother-whore, and, indeed, she finally agrees to terms of “employment.” Teddy is so concerned with getting out of the family home and back to his teaching duties, as well as his sons, in the United States, that he neglects Sam. In his speech on his critical works, Teddy separated himself from the “objects” in his family, and now that his own wife has joined his father and brothers, he has no alternative but to depart. To remain with the family is to become like them: that is perhaps one of the reasons he left for America six years before. That Teddy sacrifices Sam in order to save himself is a sign not only of the desperateness of his condition, but also of his family’s insidious power to shape a son and brother’s behavior even as he takes steps to preserve his moral autonomy—his visual perspective, as it were.

At least three images in *The Homecoming*, one spatial and two verbal, reinforce this idea of life lived without perspective, lived in the foreground as it were, without a background, or lived in a foreground and a background that are virtually synonymous. When they arrive at the family home in North London, Teddy says to Ruth,

> What do you think of the room? Big, isn’t it? It’s a big house … [my ellipsis] Actually there was a wall, across there … with a door. We knocked it down … years ago … to make an open living area. (21)

The suggestion is that, in knocking the wall down, the family created a larger foreground—ironically called an open living area—in which to play out their violent lives. They have removed from their home a background area, a back room, from which they could have taken one view of their lives.

At a certain point Max says, “I hate this room. (Pause) It’s the kitchen I like. It’s nice in there. It’s cozy” (37). He hates the “open living area” but cannot find refuge in the only other room open to him on the first floor. His brother, Sam, is “always washing up in there, scraping plates, driving me out of the kitchen” (37). Not accidentally, Sam is the only other character besides Teddy who is not “lost in it,” who can draw back from the family life and form some judgment on it. But Sam’s ability to form judgments, his perspective, does him as little good in the end as Teddy’s does him, since he does not act on those judgments. Indeed, Sam has continued to live with his brother and nephews, whereas Teddy had at least left the family for America six years before. It is significant that when Sam does take an action of sorts by blurting out that “MacGregor had Jessie [Max’s wife] in the back of my cab as I drove them along” (78), he “croaks and collapses.” He makes this statement just after Ruth and Lenny have come to an agreement about her new living and working arrangements; Sam’s words seem to be his comment both on this
transaction and the family’s past life, as well as his attempt to injure Max for past wrongs.

Shortly after Lenny meets Ruth, he tells her this story:

One night, not too long ago, one night down by the docks, I was standing alone under an arch, watching all the men jibbing the boom, out in the harbour, and playing about with the yardarm, when a certain lady came up to me and made me a certain proposal. … [my ellipsis] Well, this proposal wasn’t entirely out of order and normally I would have subscribed to it. … [my ellipsis] The only trouble was she was falling apart with the pox. So I turned it down. Well, this lady was very insistent and started taking liberties with me down under this arch, … [my ellipsis] so I clumped her one. It was on my mind at the time to do away with her, you know, to kill her, and the fact is, that as killings go, it would have been a simple matter, nothing to it. … [my ellipsis] just … [my ellipsis] this lady and myself, you see, alone, standing underneath this arch, watching all the steamers steaming up, no one about, all quiet on the Western Front, and there she was up against this wall—well, just sliding down the wall, following the blow I’d given her. Well, to sum up, everything was in my favour, for a killing. … [my ellipsis] But … in the end I thought … Aaah, why go to all the bother … you know, getting rid of the corpse and all that, getting yourself into a state of tension. So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that. (30–31)

Lenny starts his speech as if he were describing an idyllic setting from a conventional painting, where a person in the foreground under an arch, a kind of frame, looks out on a scene in the background. The only problem is, the background that Lenny describes, the scene he sets, of sailors busy on their ships, has nothing to do with what occurs in the foreground. Indeed, the sailors’ cooperation in their work contrasts sharply with Lenny and the woman’s conflict in theirs. Lenny fills in a background because he feels that one is necessary; he creates it, making it the background to a scene he ironically entitles, after Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 novel, “all quiet on the Western Front”—all is quiet in the distance, not on the front, in the foreground, where Lenny and the prostitute have quarreled.

At one point, Lenny even takes on the language of his creation, his harbor-picture, in order to make it more real to himself. Unable to view his and his family’s life from a distance, he pretends that he views others’ activities from afar. He betrays that his view is fabricated when he says that he had it at night—surely there would be little he could see of the harbor in darkness. Outside as well as inside his home, where he tells this story to Ruth, Lenny is trapped in a foreground of violence over a prostitute. Significantly, when Lenny “clumps” the prostitute under the arch, she is thrown up against a wall—a wall that he has not mentioned up to now, and that has the effect in our mind’s eye of closing off the background from view. Lenny makes no further mention of the scene in the harbor after detailing his beating of the woman: he leaves the picture.
Lenny tells Ruth another story a few moments later:

An old lady approached me and asked me if I would give her a hand with her iron mangle. Her brother-in-law … had left it … in the front room. Well, naturally, she wanted it in the back room. It was a present he’d given her, you see, a mangle, to iron out the washing. … Well, the only trouble was when I got there I couldn’t move this mangle. It must have weighed about half a ton. … So after a few minutes I said to her, now look here, why don’t you stuff this iron mangle up your arse? … I had a good mind to give her a workover there and then, but … I just gave her a short-arm jab to the belly and jumped on a bus outside. (32–33; all ellipses mine)

The mangle is a domestic appliance, but its very name connotes violence. It occasions the violence that Lenny commits against the old lady. Like the objects that Teddy accuses his father and brothers of being, it has no recourse to a back room. Even as the mangle was a gift to the old lady from her brother-in-law, so too is Ruth a brother’s “gift” to his family—or rather, Ruth is her own “gift” to her husband’s family, since she makes the decision to stay with them. Like the mangle, she will become the “domestic appliance” of her new “owners” as well as their “mangler”: they will fight over her, and, untrue to her name, she will ruthlessly dominate them.

Like Max, Lenny, and Joey, Ruth is an object who is “lost in it,” who wants to be seen but does not want to “see” herself and does not want others to provide her with a perspective on herself. Witness Ruth’s remarks to the new men in her life:

Look at me. I … move my leg. That’s all it is. … [my ellipsis] The action is simple. It’s a leg … moving. My lips move. Why don’t you restrict … your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant … than the words which come through them. You must bear that … possibility … in mind. (52–53)

Why don’t you restrict your observations to my physical being, Ruth asks, instead of trying to find meaning in my words? That is what Lenny and Joey will shortly be doing, except that they won’t simply restrict their observations to Ruth’s physical being—they will be touching her and lying with her. All three will be “lost in it” (62), in Teddy’s words, while Teddy will take on his cherished role of observer. He looks on calmly as Lenny dances with Ruth, and as Joey “leans her back [on the sofa] until she lies beneath him” (59). She has spoken of herself as an object of desire, then she is treated like one; like Teddy’s later departure from the family home, which is consistent with his pronouncement prior to it distinguishing himself from “objects,” Ruth’s sexual response to Lenny and Joey is consistent with her own pronouncements.

Ruth doesn’t ask Teddy if she can dance with and kiss Lenny; she simply does so. Ruth doesn’t question whether she should let Joey get on top of her—she just lets him. Nonetheless, Teddy says that in America Ruth was “a wonderful wife and mother [of three sons] … a very popular woman … [with] lots of friends … at the University
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[where Teddy taught philosophy] ... [she had] a very stimulating environment” (50; all ellipses mine). With Max, Lenny, and Joey in London, however, Ruth will be a prostitute outside as well as inside the home; that is, she will be the receptor of a kind of violence as well as its stimulus.

At the end of *The Homecoming* Ruth sits impassively in the “open living area” as Joey kneels at her chair, his head in her lap, Max cries for a kiss, and Lenny stands watching her. Teddy has left, and Sam lies unconscious on the floor.

* * *

What Pinter has done scenically in this play, from the characters’ point of view, and has reinforced through their language, is akin to what Cézanne did in his paintings from the 1880s onward. For more than 400 years before Cézanne, perspective had been one of the fundamental beliefs on which the creation of art had been based. John Russell writes that “by taking as its first premise a single point of vision, perspective had stabilized visual experience. It had bestowed order on chaos; it allowed elaborate and systematized cross-referencing, and quite soon it had become a touchstone of coherence and evenmindedness.” Renaissance and post-Renaissance practice had given art stability, had made it seem that we see a given object once and for all from a given point, and that the object has an absolute identity. By dismantling traditional perspective, Cézanne intended to show that identity is relative, and that men and objects are subject to time, movement, and change. His deepest concern during the last period of his art, in Russell’s words, was with “the restructuring of the act of cognition,” with the basic question, “What can a man know?” (34). Cézanne’s handling of this question was, of course, to affect virtually every artist of consequence in the twentieth century. He opened the door to “chaos,” so to speak, and those who followed him ushered “chaos” in.

If Cézanne for the most part abolished depth perception for any audience of his late paintings, Pinter, in a sense, does away with such perception for the characters in *The Homecoming* as well as for its audience. The majority of the characters do not have any perspective on themselves or on one another, as I have described, and the spectators do not have a perspective on any of the characters. The spectators have been deprived by Pinter of “background” information on the persons in the play, with the result that the former do not completely know, or don’t know with any certainty, what has led to the present situation in the family home. The characters clearly intimate depth, but it is never revealed, just as depth of character is not revealed in any of Pinter’s other plays. Like Cézanne, Pinter is concerned with the question, “What can a man know?” He believes that the greatest lie of bourgeois realism was (and is) to suggest that a character’s motives can be fully accounted for, that life can be explained. As he declared in a 1966 interview,

I do so hate the becauses of drama. Who are we to say that this happens because that happened, that one thing is the consequence of another? How do we know? What reason have we to suppose that life is so neat and tidy? The
most we know for sure is that the things which have happened have happened in a certain order: any connections we think we see, or choose to make, are pure guesswork. Life is much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. And it is this mystery which fascinates me.3

Pinter is obviously not the first to disbelieve in bourgeois realism, but no one before him attempted so brazenly to overturn it at the same time as he adopted its surface characteristics—realistic sets, costumes, language. Chekhov, for example, while he was destroying the connections between psychology and causality, and between act and consequence, placed his characters in sentimental stories—played out, to be sure, against realistic environments. Ibsen for his part employed, not just the well-made play’s surface realism, but the whole of its structure, for the purpose of triumphing over it. And Strindberg, to judge by his preface to Miss Julie (1888), believed that dramatic characters should be true to life as he saw it and act out of a multiplicity of motives, not just a single one, as they did on the middle-class stage. For him it was truly a question of the “because” of drama, of an action, not simply the “because.”

It might be a good idea to look at the outrageous action of The Homecoming as being as much about the way in which we see plays as it is about a family “homecoming.” Its action seems designed to outrage us, not only because that action itself is outrageous, but because no reasons, no justifications are given for it. And reasons, justifications, are precisely what seem called for. We may be deprived of depth of character in, say, David Storey’s Changing Room (1971), but we don’t demand it because the events in this play are hardly shocking, indeed, are at the farthest remove from what we think of as plot. Nothing needs to be accounted for in the “new naturalism” (of which The Changing Room is a prime example)—that’s the point. But in Pinter’s realism—and he insists that his plays are truly realistic—explanations seem called for and are not forthcoming. The characters’ lack of any perspective on the action of The Homecoming mirrors our own: this is the only sense in which we are identified with them.

Actually, they seem intended to be, in addition to realistic representations of human beings, devices, exaggerated foils for the spectators. The characters are “lost in it,” in Teddy’s words, and seemingly happy to be so, as much as the audience is “lost in it,” lacking perspective, and very frustrated to be so. At the end of The Homecoming it is the characters without perspective who have triumphed over those with it. Sam is unconscious—he may have suffered a heart attack or a stroke—and Teddy has left for America without his wife. Conventional perspective, the kind from a single point of view, has been banished from the play. The characters without perspective have also triumphed over the spectators, who have sought it in vain, seeking information and answers throughout the play. In a reversal of traditional dramatic irony, the characters know more than the audience does.

Max, Lenny, Joey, and Ruth may not have a perspective on their knowledge, may not be able to reflect on it from any angle, but the audience doesn’t even have that
knowledge and therefore can’t get a perspective on events in the play. In a sense—the pictorial or visual sense—the audience, sitting in the theater, does have a perspective on the action framed by the proscenium arch, but this perspective tells them nothing. They may observe from a distance, like Teddy, but they don’t have his knowledge. They do, however, leave the theater in the same way that Teddy leaves his family’s house: without having prevented Ruth from remaining with Max, Lenny, and Joey. The audience may feel betrayed by its experience at a performance of The Homecoming, but Pinter would argue, I think, that at least they have not been deceived with the artistic illusion of perspective, of depth of character and elucidation of experience.4 This, perhaps, is the real idea to be taken from a production of the play, along with its images—often framed by pauses or silences—of cold, brutal family life lived beyond conscience, beyond guilt, in a world without mores or morals.

If Cézanne opened the door to “chaos” in art by doing away with traditional perspective, Pinter, writing over eighty years later and after the avant-garde developments in the drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seems to have closed the door on dramatic “chaos” by housing it in an ostensibly realistic form, by domesticating it, if you will. In fact what he has done, in The Homecoming as in many of his other plays, and what the avant-garde dramatists before him did not succeed in doing, is open the door to chaos in life for a wide audience, reveal the disorder beneath the perspective each of us attempts to impose on existence. Pinter has seduced us with the mask of realism, then shocked us with the face of reality.

Looking at the play from another perspective, if you will—and to continue the painterly metaphor—it might be a good idea to conceive of The Homecoming less as a work about recognizable people than as a painting in which colors contrast and some colors stand out in comparison with others: in other words, as a proscribed, amoral world where the only concern is one individual’s domination or submission to another, where the words “good” and “bad” cease to exist, and where there are only differences between people, between things, or between people conceived of as things. Pinter thus abstracts life here so as to take it to its farthest reaches, to consider its wildest possibilities. He has invented an astonishing action and astonishing characters in The Homecoming in the same way that a modern painter invents images that experiment with color and bear little relationship to real, observable life. One could even say that Pinter has extended the boundaries of dramatic art in this play, for he has suggested that human life is interesting chiefly for what it could become, for the possibilities of action inherent in it, rather than for what it is. Paradoxically, he creates human beings, yet seems to feel restricted by his felt need to make them at least partially recognizable.

More like a painter than a dramatist, Pinter is interested, not in probing or analyzing character, but instead in outlining, even augmenting, the human figure; in framing the space between people and between words (hence one explanation for the many pauses and silences in his work); and in words themselves as objects stripped of their arbitrary, incidental meanings and worthy of presentation in their own right, without connection to fact or intention, history or psychology. Like Teddy in The Homecoming, as well as
other characters of his, Harold Pinter seems, then, to be a stranger in the house he calls home: a man of modern art, of exquisite painterly sensibility, compelled for reasons unknown to write dramas of domestic menace or terror.

NOTES


4 Indeed, one could argue that the audience has been provided with a double or even triple perspective—hence no perspective or no single, absolute point of view—on every character in *The Homecoming* except Teddy. Thus Max is a butcher, a race-horse handler, a flesh merchant, or a combination of all three; Joey is a boxer, a demolitions expert, a simple thug, or some combination of this trio of “professions”; Ruth was a photographer’s model and/or a prostitute, and this wife and mother is now in the process of resuming the world’s oldest profession; Sam is a chauffeur, a male prostitute, a driver for call girls, or two-to-three of these occupations in one; Jessie was a wife-cum-mother and/or a whore; and Lenny is a pimp and/or a slumlord.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


