CHAPTER 7
Writing about Plays

Perhaps the earliest literary critic in the Western tradition was Aristotle, who, in the fifth century B.C.E., set about explaining the power of the genre of tragedy by identifying the six elements of drama and analyzing the contribution each of these elements makes to the functioning of a play as a whole. The elements Aristotle identified as common to all dramas were plot, characterization, theme, diction, melody, and spectacle. Some of these are the same as or very similar to the basic components of prose fiction and poetry, but others are either unique to drama or expressed differently in dramatic texts.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

Plot, Character, and Theme

The words plot, character, and theme mean basically the same thing in drama as they do in fiction, though there is a difference in how they are presented. A story tells you about a series of events, whereas a play shows you these events happening in real time. The information that might be conveyed in descriptive passages in prose fiction must be conveyed in a play through dialogue (and to a lesser extent through stage directions and the set and character descriptions that sometimes occur at the start of a play). The "How to Read a Play" section later in this chapter gives suggestions and advice for understanding these special features of drama.

Diction

When Aristotle speaks of diction, he means the specific words that a playwright chooses to put into the mouth of a character. In a well-written play, different characters will have different ways of speaking, and these will tell us a good deal about their character and personality. Does one character sound very formal and well educated? Does another speak in slang or dialect? Does someone hesitate or speak in fits and starts?
perhaps indicating distraction or nervousness? Practice paying attention to these nuances. And keep in mind that just because a character says something, that doesn't make it true. As in real life, some characters might be mistaken in what they say, or they may be hiding the truth or even telling outright lies.

Melody and Spectacle

When Aristotle writes of melody, he is referring to the fact that Greek drama was written in verse and was chanted or sung onstage. The role of melody varies substantially with the work created in different cultures and time periods. In the English Renaissance, Shakespeare and his contemporaries used iambic pentameter and occasional end-rhymes to create dramas in verse, and staged productions have often used some kind of music, whether it be instrumental, vocal, or a mix of both. Melody is much less significant in drama today, though some plays do contain songs, of course. In musical theater, and even more in opera, songs carry much of the meaning of the play. Even in a play with no overt musical component, though, the rhythm of spoken words is important, just as it is in a poem. Even an actor's tone of voice can be considered a part of melody in the Aristotelian sense.

Spectacle refers to what we actually see onstage when we go to a play—the costumes, the actors' movements, the sets, the lights, and so forth. All of these details make a difference in how we understand and interpret a play's message. Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy will resonate differently with an audience if the actor playing Hamlet is wearing ripped jeans and a T-shirt, or a modern military uniform, rather than the conventional Renaissance doublet and hose. In reading a play, it is important to remember that it was not written to be read only, but rather so that it would be seen onstage in the communal setting of a theater. Reading with this in mind and trying to imagine the spectacle of a real production will increase your enjoyment of plays immensely. Specific suggestions for this sort of reading can be found in the "How to Read a Play" section of this chapter.

Setting

Setting, which Aristotle ignores completely, is just as important in drama as it is in fiction. But again, in drama it must be either displayed onstage or alluded to through the characters' words rather than being described as it might be in a story or a poem. The texts of modern plays often (though not always) begin with elaborate descriptions of the stage, furniture, major props, and so forth, which can be very useful in helping you picture a production. These tend to be absent in older plays, so in some cases you will have to use your imagination to fill in these gaps. In Act 4 of Hamlet, the characters are in a castle one moment and on a windswept plain the next. The only way a reader can be aware of this shift, though, is by paying close attention to the words and actions that characters use to signal a change of locale.

HOW TO READ A PLAY

Very few of us read plays for pleasure in the same way that we might take a novel with us to the beach. This isn't surprising; most playwrights, in fact, never intend for their plays to be read in this way. Drama is a living art, and if you read the play text on the page, you are getting only one part of what has made drama so important to all cultures across many time periods. Plays are written for the stage and are meant to be experienced primarily in live performance. This means that as a reader you must be especially attentive to nuances of language in a play, which often means imagining what might be happening onstage during a particular passage of speech. Using your imagination in this way—in effect, stages the play in your mind—will help you with some of the difficulties inherent in reading plays.

If you have access to film versions of the play that you are examining, be sure to watch them. Do bear in mind, though, that play scripts usually undergo substantial rewriting to adapt them for film, so you will still need to read the play in its original form, perhaps making comparisons between the stage and film versions. If you are reading a Shakespeare play, you can usually choose from several film versions, many of which might be in your library's collection. Live drama, of course, is different from film. Check the listings of local theaters to see what they are staging; you might find that a theater company is performing the play that you have to read for your class.

Some of the most skilled readers of plays are theater directors. These professionals have developed the ability to read a play and instantly see and hear in their minds the many possibilities for how the play might look and sound onstage. Directors understand that a play script is just one piece of a large, collaborative process involving playwright, director, designers, actors, backstage crew, and audience. Every new production of a play is different—sometimes vastly different—from the productions that have gone before, and every play script yields nearly endless possibilities for creative staging. By altering the look and feel of a play, a director puts his or her individual stamp on it, connecting with the audience in a unique way and helping that audience understand the
playwright's and the director's messages. The questions that follow are the sort that a director would consider when reading a play. As you read plays for your literature class, these questions can help you formulate a consistent and strong interpretation.

**DIRECTOR'S QUESTIONS FOR PLAY ANALYSIS**

- What is the main message or theme of the play? What thoughts and/or feelings could be stirred up in an audience during a performance?
- In what kind of theater would you like to stage this play? A large, high-tech space with room to accommodate a huge audience? Or something more intimate?
- What sort of audience would you hope to attract to a production of this play? Older people? Young adults? Kids? Urban or rural? A mix? Who would get the most from the play's messages and themes?
- What sort of actors would you cast in the lead roles? Think about the sort of people you want for the various roles in terms of age, physical description, and so on. What should their voices sound like? Loud and commanding? Soft and timid?
- What kind of physical movement, blocking, or choreography would you want to see onstage? What are the most dramatic moments in the script? The most quiet or subtle?
- What would the set design look like? Would it change between acts and scenes or remain the same for the duration of the play?
- How would the characters be costumed? Period clothes? Modern dress? Something totally different? How could costuming contribute to character development?
- How much spectacle do you want? Would there be vivid sound and lighting effects? Or are you looking for a more naturalistic feel? How would this help portray the play's message?

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**SUSAN GLASPELL** [1882-1948]

**Trifles**

**Characters**

GEORGE HENDERSON, county attorney  
HENRY PETERS, sheriff  
LEWIS HALE, a neighboring farmer  
MRS. PETERS  
MRS. HALE

**Scene:** The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—the walls covered with a faded wall-paper. Down right is a door leading to the parlor. On the right wall above this door is a built-in kitchen cupboard with shelves in the upper portion and drawers below. In the rear wall at right, up two steps is a door opening onto stairs leading to the second floor. In the rear wall at left is a door to the shed and from there to the outside. Between these two doors is an old-fashioned black iron stove. Running along the left wall from the shed door is an old iron sink and sink shelf, in which is set a hand pump. Downstage of the sink is an uncurtained window. Near the window is an old wooden rocker. Center stage is an unpainted wooden kitchen table with straight chairs on either side. There is a small chair down right. Unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table—other signs of incompleteness. At the rear the shed door opens and the Sheriff comes in followed by the County Attorney and Hale. The Sheriff and Hale are men in middle life, the County Attorney is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the Sheriff's wife, Mrs. Peters, first: she is a slight, white woman, a thin nervous face. Mrs. Hale is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly, and stand close together near the door.

**COUNTY ATTORNEY** (at stove rubbing his hands): This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies.

**MRS. PETERS** (after taking a step forward): I'm not—cold.

**SHERIFF** (unbuttoning his overcoat and stepping away from the stove to right of table as if to mark the beginning of official business): Now, Mr. Hale, before we move things about, you explain to Mr. Henderson just what you saw when you came here yesterday morning.

**COUNTY ATTORNEY** (crossing down to left of the table): By the way, has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday?

**SHERIFF** (looking about): It's just about the same. When it dropped below zero last night I thought I'd better send Frank out this morning to