English Drama

A Study Book in English Modern Letters

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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Chapter 1: What Drama Is — Text, Performance and Audience

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain why a play is both a literary text and a score for performance;
- distinguish dialogue, monologue, soliloquy, aside and stage directions, and state what each contributes;
- describe the role of the audience as a participant in dramatic meaning;
- read a scene twice: once for what is said, and once for what is done.

1.1 A play is an event, not only a text

A novel is complete on the page. A poem is complete on the page. A play is complete only when bodies, voices, space and an audience are added. The printed play is therefore a double thing: a work of literature you can study in a chair, and a set of instructions — incomplete by design — for an event in a theatre.

This doubleness should shape all your reading. When you read a scene, ask two families of questions. Literary questions: What does this language mean? How is it patterned? What does it reveal? Theatrical questions: Who is on stage? Who can hear this speech? Where are the characters standing, and what changes in the room because these words were spoken now, in front of these witnesses?

A line that looks plain on the page may be devastating in performance because of who hears it. A speech that looks magnificent may fail if an actor cannot make its thought clear in one hearing. Playwrights write for the ear that cannot turn back a page. That is why dramatic dialogue repeats key information, why entrances

are announced in the text itself, and why great scenes are built on clear actions even when their ideas are subtle.

1.2 The tools of the trade

Dialogue is speech exchanged between characters. It is the main fabric of most plays. Read dialogue as action: almost every line tries to do something — persuade, conceal, test, wound, comfort, delay, seduce, accuse. If you cannot say what a line is trying to do, read the scene again.

A **monologue** is an extended speech by one character addressed to others on stage. A **soliloquy** is a character speaking alone, or believing themselves alone, giving the audience access to inward thought. An **aside** is a brief remark heard by the audience but not by the other characters. A **chorus** — inherited from Greek drama — is a group or figure who comments on the action, frames it, and sometimes speaks for the audience's own unease.

Stage directions are the playwright's written instructions about movement, setting and delivery. In older plays they are sparse; in modern plays they may be long and literary. Treat them as evidence, not as decoration — but remember that directors may depart from them, and that a direction tells you what the playwright imagined, not what every performance must do.

1.3 The audience completes the play

Dramatic irony exists only in the audience. It occurs when the audience knows more than a character knows, so that the character's words carry a second meaning the character cannot hear. Suspense is the opposite arrangement: the audience shares the character's ignorance and leans forward with them. Skilled playwrights alternate between the two, sometimes within a single scene.

The audience is also a crowd, and crowds respond together: laughter, silence and restlessness are collective events. Comedy especially is written for that collectivity — a pause for laughter is built into the rhythm of a good comic script. When you study a play on the page, keep imagining the room. Where would an audience laugh? Where would it go quiet? Those imagined responses are legitimate evidence in an essay, provided you tie them to the words that produce them.

1.4 A brief map of the English stage

English drama grows from medieval religious plays performed by guilds and communities, through the professional theatres of Shakespeare's London — open-air playhouses, boy actors, a stage jutting into a standing crowd — to the indoor, candlelit Restoration stage with actresses and witty comedies of manners, the large popular theatres of the nineteenth century, and the experimental stages of the twentieth. Each era's building shaped its writing: the open platform stage encouraged direct address and rapid scene changes; the picture-frame stage with realistic sets encouraged drawing-room drama and hidden revelations. Form follows building more often than students expect.

Worked Example 1.1: A soliloquy as thinking in public

Hamlet's most famous soliloquy in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins (public domain):

> *To be, or not to be, that is the question…*

In plain terms, Hamlet weighs existence against non-existence: whether it is nobler to endure suffering or to end it. But notice the theatrical arrangement. The audience is made into Hamlet's confidant; no other character shares this knowledge in this form. The speech is not a report of a decision already made —

it is the decision failing to happen, in real time, in balanced alternatives that keep cancelling each other. That is why the soliloquy matters structurally: after it, we understand that Hamlet's delay is not cowardice alone but a mind that turns every action into a question. When you analyse a soliloquy, always ask what the audience now knows that the rest of the play's world does not, and how that knowledge will charge the scenes that follow.

Worked Example 1.2: One line, two hearings

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, after the murder he has committed, Macbeth says of sleep that he has murdered it — in the play's words, "Macbeth does murder sleep" (public domain). On the page this is a striking metaphor. In the theatre it is spoken by a man listening to a voice no one else hears, in a castle where his wife is trying to keep the night ordinary. The audience hears both the metaphor and the symptom: a mind already punishing itself. Lady Macbeth hears, or pretends to hear, only nonsense to be washed away with a little water. The gap between those hearings is the tragedy in miniature. Train yourself to write about that gap: "the audience hears X, while character Y hears only Z" is one of the most productive sentence patterns in drama criticism.

Exercises — Chapter 1

1. Choose a scene from a play you are studying. For each of its six most important lines, write what the line does (persuades, conceals, tests, and so on) beside what it says.
2. Find a moment of dramatic irony in a play you know. Explain what the audience knows, what the character does not, and how the gap changes the meaning of the character's words.

3. Read a short scene silently, then aloud with a partner or imagined voices. Write a paragraph on what the aloud reading revealed that the silent reading had hidden.

Answer guidance

4. If a line seems to do nothing, check whether it delays something, or gives another character time to decide. Delay is an action in drama, especially in scenes of interrogation, courtship and conspiracy.
5. Strong answers quote the character's words and show the second meaning operating inside the actual phrasing, not merely in the situation around it.
6. Aloud readings usually reveal rhythm, interruptions and the practical length of speeches. Note any speech that felt too long to listen to: the playwright may intend exhaustion, evasion or self-display — or the moment may mark a deliberate slowing before a revelation.

Chapter 2: Plot and Structure — Acts, Scenes and the Shape of Action

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe exposition, complication, crisis, climax and resolution, and find them in a real play;
- explain the difference between plot and story, and between a well-made structure and an episodic one;
- analyse subplots and parallel scenes as commentary on the main action;
- discuss entrances, exits and scene endings as structural events.

2.1 Story and plot

The story is everything that happens, in chronological order, including what happened before the play begins. The plot is the arrangement the playwright chooses: what is shown, what is reported, what is withheld and in what order revelations fall. Two plays can share a story and have opposite effects because their plots differ.

Ask of any play: why does it begin here, and not a year earlier? The beginning is a decision. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins not with the old king's death but with frightened watchmen and a ghost: the plot begins at the moment the past refuses to stay buried. Exposition — the feeding of background to the audience — is most elegant when it is disguised as present action: an argument, a warning, a confession, a piece of news that changes the hearer's plans.

2.2 The classical shape and its variations

Traditional analysis divides a play's action into exposition (the situation established), complication or rising action (conflicts tighten), crisis and climax (the decisive confrontation or discovery), falling action (consequences unfold) and resolution or catastrophe (a new order, happy or desolate, is established). Five-act structure, inherited from Roman practice and codified in the Renaissance, gives this shape a home; three-act and two-act structures compress it; some modern plays refuse it, arranging scenes by image or theme rather than by cause and effect.

Do not apply the shape like a stamp. Use it to locate pressure. In particular, find the moment after which things cannot go back — the point of no return. It may be a deed, a spoken vow, a letter sent, a door closed. Naming that moment precisely, with its scene, is strong structural analysis.

2.3 Scenes as units

A scene changes when the stage empties, the place changes, or the combination of people changes so completely that a new negotiation begins. Within scenes, look for smaller units sometimes called beats: stretches where one tactic governs, until someone changes tactics. A character pleads, then threatens, then weeps: three beats. Directors rehearse by beats; critics can write by beats, because a beat change is where character becomes visible.

Scene endings deserve special attention. A playwright ends a scene on a line or image that either resolves the scene's question or sharpens it into a hook for the next. Compare a scene that ends in decision with one that ends in interruption: the audience carries different energies across the interval.

2.4 Subplots and parallels

A subplot is a secondary line of action involving secondary characters. Weak subplots merely fill time. Strong subplots mirror, parody or test the main plot. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare gives the subplot of Gloucester and his two sons the same skeleton as the main plot — a father misjudging his children — so that Lear's story is shown to be not a king's eccentricity but a pattern of human blindness. When you write about a subplot, your key word is "meanwhile, in smaller compass…" or "in comic inversion…". Always state the relationship; never merely summarise the subplot's events.

Parallel scenes — similar situations staged twice with different characters or outcomes — work the same way at smaller scale. A playwright who shows two interviews, two proposals or two betrayals in sequence is inviting comparison. Accept the invitation explicitly in your essay.

Worked Example 2.1: The play within the plot

In *Hamlet*, the prince stages a play re-enacting his father's murder before the suspected murderer, the King. Structurally, this is a machine for turning suspicion into evidence: Hamlet watches the watcher. But it is also a mirror held to the whole drama — a play about a play, in which theatre itself becomes the instrument of truth. Note how the main plot pauses (the revenge is still not done) while the inner plot accelerates (the King's guilt is displayed). Shakespeare can afford the pause because the inner play changes what everyone in the audience knows. A structural event earns its place by changing knowledge, power or intention. Test any scene you study by that standard: what does it change?

Worked Example 2.2: A tragedy built like a trap

Macbeth is unusually short and fast for a Shakespearean tragedy. Its plot removes alternatives one by one: prophecy, temptation, murder, further murders to secure the first, isolation, and a final advance of enemies that fulfils the prophecies in the one sense Macbeth never imagined. The speed is the meaning. Each scene shortens the corridor. When you analyse structure in this play, track what option disappears in each act; the falling action is not a winding-down but a closing-in. Compare that with the sprawling, doubling structure of *Lear* and you have the beginning of a fine comparative essay: one tragedy narrows, the other widens, and each shape embodies its vision of evil.

Exercises — Chapter 2

7. For a play you are studying, identify the point of no return. Defend your choice against one rival candidate moment.
8. Summarise a subplot in five sentences. Then write two sentences stating its relationship to the main plot, using "mirror", "parody" or "test".
9. Take two consecutive scenes. Explain what the audience carries from the end of the first into the beginning of the second: knowledge, mood, expectation or irony.

Answer guidance

10. The true point of no return is the moment whose consequences the rest of the play cannot undo, however hard characters try. If your rival candidate is earlier, ask whether the character could still have turned back after it; if yes, it was a temptation, not the point.

11. If your two relationship sentences could be written without having read the main plot, rewrite them. A real relationship claim names a shared pattern and a significant difference.
12. Scene junctions are where playwrights manage energy. Look especially for contrasts: noise after silence, public after private, comedy after horror — and ask what the contrast makes the audience feel about both scenes.

Chapter 3: Character and Dialogue — How People Are Made of Words

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain how character in drama is built from speech, action, others' reports and silence;
- analyse a character's language: vocabulary, sentence shape, imagery, verse or prose, and changes across the play;
- distinguish flat from round characters in drama and judge when flatness is a deliberate comic or satirical tool;
- write about a relationship by studying how two characters' dialogue changes when they are together.

3.1 Character without a narrator

A novelist can tell you what a character thinks. A playwright must show it, through what the character says and does, what others say about them, and — powerfully — what the character cannot say. Silence, evasion and sudden topic changes are character evidence. So is the gap between a character's self-description and their behaviour. Keep a double ledger as you read: what this person claims to be; what the scenes prove them to be. Drama lives in the difference.

Entrances matter. A character's first scene is an argument about who they are, made before we have evidence to check it. Compare first impressions with final ones: the distance travelled is the character's arc. Some characters change; others are revealed, which is different — the audience changes its understanding

while the character stays constant. Decide which pattern fits the figure you are writing about, and defend it.

3.2 Verse, prose and social music

In Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the choice between verse and prose carries meaning. Verse, especially blank verse, tends to mark elevation: public speech, high passion, nobility of mind. Prose tends to mark the everyday, the comic, the mad, the intimate or the deliberately plain. Characters move between them, and the movement speaks. A king who drops into prose may be unravelling or unmasking; a clown who rises into verse may be claiming a dignity the court denies him. In later drama the same work is done by dialect, register and rhythm: formal against slang, standard against regional, fluent against halting.

Sentence shape is character. Short, broken sentences under pressure; long, balanced sentences from a mind in command of itself — or performing command. Note questions: who asks them, who answers, who refuses to answer. In dialogue, power often belongs not to the person who speaks most but to the person who decides what the conversation is about.

3.3 Dialogue as contest and as dance

Good dialogue has subtext: the meaning beneath the words. Characters rarely say exactly what they want, because wanting openly is dangerous, embarrassing or impolite. They hint, joke, flatter, change the subject, answer a different question from the one asked. Your analysis should name the subtext and show the textual clues — a word repeated with a difference, a compliment with a blade in it, an endearment used as a leash.

Also listen for echo. When one character takes up another's word or image and returns it altered, the play is showing influence, intimacy or combat. Lovers echo tenderly; enemies echo to mock; a character who begins to speak in another's phrases may be being colonised by that person's mind. Echo-tracking is detailed work, and examiners reward it because it cannot be faked from a summary.

3.4 Types, stereotypes and individuals

Drama inherits stock figures: the boastful soldier, the clever servant, the miser, the ingénue, the villain with a grievance. Strong playwrights use the audience's expectation of the type as raw material — fulfilling it for comic satisfaction or breaking it for surprise and depth. In your essays, name the type when you see one, then specify what this instance adds. "A miser, but a miser whose hoarding is revealed as fear of a childhood poverty" is analysis; "a miser" alone is labelling.

Worked Example 3.1: A villain who explains himself

Shakespeare's Richard III opens his play by addressing the audience directly, announcing in the famous opening that begins "Now is the winter of our discontent" (public domain) that, being deformed and shut out from love's pleasures, he is determined to prove a villain. The character is built in layers: the court's report would call him monster; his own report calls him honest about his intentions; his behaviour in scene after scene shows wit, speed and a performer's joy in improvisation. The audience's uncomfortable pleasure in his company is part of the design: we are made complicit before we are made judges. When writing about such a figure, hold all three layers at once and resist the essay that uses only one.

Worked Example 3.2: Two voices, one relationship

Consider how, in *Macbeth*, husband and wife exchange registers across the play. Early, Lady Macbeth's sentences are commands and incantations; she supplies the resolve her husband lacks, and her imagery is of darkness invoked and welcomed. Macbeth's early speeches hesitate, qualify, imagine consequences. After the murder the exchange reverses: his language hardens into plans and orders while hers thins into fragments, until in her sleepwalking she speaks broken prose, washing hands that exist only in her mind. The relationship's whole history can be written from sentence shape alone. That is the standard to aim at: an essay on a relationship should be able to point to the lines where the balance of power audibly shifts.

Exercises — Chapter 3

13. Keep the double ledger for one character across a whole play: five claims they make about themselves, each matched with scene evidence for or against.
14. Choose a two-person scene. Mark every question: who asks, who answers, who evades. Write a paragraph on power in the scene based only on that evidence.
15. Find a passage where a character echoes another's words with a difference. Analyse the echo: what has changed, and what does the change reveal?

Answer guidance

16. The most revealing ledger entries are claims contradicted kindly — where the play shows the character is better, braver or more loving than their own account — not only claims exposed as lies.
17. Evasion is an answer. Note its form: joke, counter-question, compliment, exit. Each form tells you what the character fears in the original question.

18. Quote both versions of the echoed phrase. If you quote only the second, the marker cannot see the difference you are claiming.

Chapter 4: Tragedy — Suffering, Error and Recognition

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- summarise the classical account of tragedy: a serious action, a protagonist of stature, error, suffering, recognition and catharsis;
- discuss hamartia, hubris, peripeteia and anagnorisis accurately, and apply them without forcing them;
- explain how Renaissance, and later, tragedy adapted the classical inheritance;
- evaluate a modern account of tragedy and defend your own view of a set play.

4.1 The classical inheritance

The Greek philosopher Aristotle, analysing the tragedies of his own culture, described tragedy as the imitation of a serious and complete action that arouses pity and fear and effects a catharsis — a purging or clarification — of those emotions. The tragic protagonist is neither wholly good nor wholly bad; their downfall comes through hamartia, a word better translated as error or missing of the mark than as a moral "flaw" stamped on the character from birth. Around the error cluster two great reversals: peripeteia, the turn of fortune, and anagnorisis, the recognition — the moment a character discovers a truth about themselves or another that reorders everything.

Use these terms as instruments, not as a checklist to impose. Some plays fit them closely; others strain them instructively. The essay that notices where a play

refuses the pattern usually understands both the pattern and the play better than the essay that forces a fit.

4.2 Renaissance tragedy: the individual against the order

English Renaissance tragedy takes the classical shape into a Christian and courtly world. Its heroes — a prince, a general, a king, a scholar who bargains with darkness — fall not only through error but through collision between their inner life and the order around them: the court, the state, the heavens. Revenge tragedy adds its own machinery: a ghost or a duty demanding vengeance, delay, madness real or feigned, and a stage finally heaped with bodies. Seneca's Roman plays, full of rhetoric and horror, stand behind the tradition.

Notice the role of the soliloquy in this tragedy (Chapter 1). Greek heroes act within a chorus's commentary; Renaissance heroes think alone before us. The centre of tragedy moves inward, and the audience becomes the witness of a conscience. That is why Renaissance tragedy remains the great school of the soliloquy — and why its heroes can seem modern even when their world is not.

4.3 Later tragedies: the hero without a crown

Later centuries democratise tragedy. The protagonist may be a merchant, a clerk, a mother — the claim being that intensity of suffering, not rank, makes tragedy. The twentieth century's famous statement of this claim defends the common person as a fit tragic subject, arguing that the wound to dignity is the same wound, whatever the sufferer's station. When you meet such a play, the critical question shifts: not "what error did this great one commit?" but "what in the world around this ordinary person made their error almost inevitable — and does the play judge the person, the world, or both?"

Modern tragedy also questions catharsis. Some plays refuse the audience any purged, settled feeling and end in waste or silence, intending that we leave disturbed rather than reconciled. Describe that refusal accurately; do not manufacture a consolation the play withholds.

4.4 The machinery of pity and fear

Pity and fear are engineered. Pity grows when suffering exceeds desert; fear grows when the sufferer's error resembles errors we recognise in ourselves. Playwrights tune both: they give the hero a virtue we admire, a blindness we share, and a moment of recognition that arrives exactly too late. In analysis, locate the tuning. Which scene makes us pity? Which makes us afraid — not of the stage events, but of ourselves? Essays that can answer those two questions are writing about tragedy, not merely about sad stories.

Worked Example 4.1: Recognition in *King Lear*

Lear begins by misjudging his daughters in a public ceremony, rewarding flattery and banishing truth. His recognition is not a single moment but a stripping: on the heath, in storm and madness, the king who divided a kingdom learns what unaccommodated humanity is — cold, hungry, unprotected — and learns it by becoming it. When recognition finally joins pity, in his care for others' suffering, the man who could not hear "nothing" from his truthful daughter has become someone who can beg forgiveness on his knees. The peripeteia is total: from throne to hovel. The anagnorisis is moral: he discovers not a fact but himself. Use Lear to test any theory of tragedy you meet: a theory that cannot accommodate a recognition spread across madness and weather is too small for the play.

Worked Example 4.2: Error in *Macbeth*

Macbeth's hamartia is often lazily named "ambition". Be more precise. Ambition alone does not murder kings; Macbeth's error is a compound: he treats a prophecy as a permission, he lets imagination rehearse the deed until the deed feels fated, and he surrenders his judgement to his wife's taunt at the exact moment his own conscience had reached the right conclusion. The play shows the conclusion — his great soliloquy of reasons against the murder is logically complete — and then shows it discarded. That is tragedy's hardest lesson and its best essay material: the hero falls not from ignorance of the good but from failure to act on knowledge he fully possesses.

Exercises — Chapter 4

19. For a tragedy you are studying, write careful definitions-in-use of hamartia, peripeteia and anagnorisis, each tied to a named scene.
20. Write a paragraph arguing whether the protagonist of your set tragedy deserves pity beyond their suffering's proportion to their fault. Use the play's own tuning of pity as evidence.
21. Compare a classical or Renaissance tragedy with a modern one you know. What has happened to rank, to recognition and to the ending's consolation?

Answer guidance

22. If a term does not fit, say where it strains. A defended misfit earns more than a forced fit, provided you show you understand the term itself.
23. Look for the scene where the play most insists on the hero's virtue or vulnerability; playwrights place such scenes deliberately, often just before the catastrophe, to maximise pity.

24. Strong comparisons notice that modern tragedy often relocates hamartia from the hero's soul to the hero's circumstances — and then argue about whether the play endorses that relocation or exposes it as an excuse.

Chapter 5: Comedy — Laughter, Disguise and Restoration

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe the typical movement of comedy: confusion, disguise and blockage resolved in reconciliation, marriage or feast;
- explain the blocking character, the trickster and the fool, and the licence comedy gives to each;
- analyse comic dialogue: wit, wordplay, misunderstanding and the rule of three;
- discuss the edge in comedy — satire, cruelty and the figures comedy excludes — with critical balance.

5.1 The shape of comedy

Where tragedy narrows towards death, comedy widens towards society. A typical comic plot begins with a blockage: a law, a parent, a guardian, a misunderstanding or a vow stands between young desire and its fulfilment. The middle multiplies confusion — disguises, mistaken identities, letters gone astray, twins taken for one another. The end unties: identities are restored, the blocking figure is converted, defeated or forgiven, and the community re-forms around marriages, dances or a feast.

That shape is not trivial. Comedy is the genre that believes the world can be repaired, at least for an evening. Its endings are arguments: that forgiveness is possible, that rigidity is more dangerous than appetite, that the young should inherit the world but the old should be found a place in it too. When a comedy's

ending feels strained — a conversion too sudden, a character excluded from the dance — the strain is worth an essay, because it shows where the play's own belief in repair runs out.

5.2 Comic persons

The **blocking character** (the heavy father, the puritan steward, the jealous guardian) embodies the rule that must bend. The **trickster** — servant, friend or disguised heroine — does the bending, armed with plots, letters and costumes. The **fool** holds a special licence: professional fools and clowns may speak truths to the powerful that would cost others their heads, because their folly is supposed to make the truth deniable. Watch what a play allows its fool to say. The fool's permitted truths are a map of the society's sore places.

Disguise is comedy's master device because it separates identity from appearance and lets the play test both. A heroine disguised as a youth can hear how men speak when no woman is present; a servant in his master's clothes discovers whether respect belonged to the man or the coat. In essays, always ask what the disguise makes knowable that nothing else could.

5.3 The mechanics of laughter

Comic dialogue runs on timing and pattern. Wordplay turns on double meanings, some innocent, some bawdy, many both at once. Misunderstanding scenes build by the rule of three: the error is established, repeated with variation, and topped by a third turn that breaks or crowns the pattern. Comic speeches often list — grievances, praises, conditions — and the list itself, growing beyond reason, becomes the joke and the characterisation at once.

Beneath the mechanics sits incongruity: the gap between what a character claims and what we see, between dignity and circumstance, between the word

and the thing. Your analysis should name the incongruity precisely. "This is funny because it is unexpected" is a start; "the steward who condemns all revelry describes the revels he hates in imagery so rich that the speech betrays the appetite it condemns" is criticism.

5.4 Comedy's edge

Comedy punishes. It ridicules misers, hypocrites, pedants and social climbers, and its laughter can be a community closing ranks against an outsider. Some figures are expelled rather than reconciled — the melancholy malcontent who refuses the dance, the steward humiliated by a forged letter. A mature reading holds both truths: the ending restores harmony, and the harmony has a price, paid by someone. Modern productions often darken exactly there. In your writing, follow the excluded figure to the edge of the stage and ask what the play does with our sympathy for them.

Worked Example 5.1: The disguised heroine

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Viola, shipwrecked and believing her twin brother lost, disguises herself as a young man and enters a duke's service — then falls in love with the duke while carrying his love messages to a countess who falls in love with the messenger. The disguise generates the plot, but its deeper work is knowledge: Viola alone knows the whole pattern, and her asides make the audience her confidants. Her famous ring of confusion — in which she reflects that she is not what she plays (paraphrased here; study the speech in the play) — states comedy's thesis in one knot: identity is a part performed, and love keeps mistaking the costume for the player. When the twin returns, costume and person can be separated again, and the marriages sort themselves — all but one

suitor, and the humiliated steward, whose exit line promising revenge leaves comedy's edge deliberately unhealed.

Worked Example 5.2: Wit as combat

Restoration and later comedy of manners turns conversation into fencing. In such scenes two wits test each other with conditions, definitions and repartee, often negotiating love as if it were a treaty — because for their class, marriage was a treaty about property and freedom. Oscar Wilde, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, perfected the form: his characters' epigrams invert common sense so elegantly that the audience laughs first and thinks afterwards. Wilde's most quoted paradoxes argue that surfaces tell truths and sincerity is a pose. Analyse one such scene by tracking who wins each exchange and how the verdict of wit becomes the verdict of love: in comedy of manners, the best talker is usually being groomed for the happiest ending, and that equation of eloquence with worth is itself open to your criticism.

Exercises — Chapter 5

25. Map a comedy you know onto the shape: blockage, confusions, untying. Then identify one element that does not fit the map and write a paragraph about it.
26. Choose a disguise in a comedy. List three things the disguise makes knowable, and one thing it makes impossible.
27. Write about a comic scene twice: first explaining its mechanics (pattern, timing, incongruity), then judging its edge — who pays for this laughter?

Answer guidance

28. Misfits are gold. A blocking figure who is right, a marriage nobody celebrates, a fool who stops being funny — begin your essay there.

29. Disguise always costs something: a conversation that cannot happen, a truth that cannot be told in one's own person. Naming the cost shows you understand the device rather than merely spotting it.
30. If your second account contradicts your first, do not smooth it over. Comedy often is mechanically delightful and morally uncomfortable at once; saying both, with evidence, is the balanced judgement markers seek.

Chapter 6: Modern Drama and the Play on the Page — Reading, Staging and Writing About Plays

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe the main movements of modern drama: realism and naturalism, epic theatre, the theatre of the absurd, and postcolonial stages;
- explain how modern stage directions, settings and silences carry meaning;
- approach an unfamiliar play with a practical reading protocol for text and performance;
- plan and write a strong essay on drama, using theatrical as well as literary evidence.

6.1 Realism and its discontents

In the late nineteenth century, playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen (whose plays in English translation shaped the English stage) brought serious contemporary problems into the drawing room: marriage as an economic contract, inherited disease and inherited guilt, a woman's right to a self. Realism's set — a room with real furniture, doors that lock — is an argument that environment presses on character. Naturalism pressed harder, treating heredity and milieu as near-destiny. When you study a realist play, read the room: what does its furniture say about money, respectability and entrapment? The famous slammed door at the end of Ibsen's most discussed play is a sound effect that became a thesis: a whole criticism of a marriage in one noise.

Realism also changed acting and dialogue: subtext deepened, because respectable rooms forbade plain speech. The unsaid became modern drama's native country, and the pause became an instrument as expressive as any speech.

6.2 Epic theatre and the absurd

Bertolt Brecht, reacting against theatre that merely made audiences weep and identify, built an epic theatre designed to make audiences think and judge. His alienation effect — songs interrupting scenes, placards announcing outcomes in advance, actors visibly presenting characters rather than disappearing into them — blocks easy empathy so that social causes can be examined. Whether or not a set play is Brecht's, his question is portable: does this play want me to feel with its people or to judge their world? Many plays want both, in sequence, and tracking the sequence is fine analysis.

After the Second World War, the theatre of the absurd staged a world in which language, memory and purpose themselves break down: tramps waiting for someone who does not come, couples whose conversation circles like a drain. Samuel Beckett's waiting figures are the emblem. Absurd drama is not nonsense; it is a precise notation of meaning's failure, and its comedy and desolation are inseparable. Analyse it by its repetitions and variations, as you would music, rather than demanding a plot it deliberately withholds.

6.3 Postcolonial and contemporary stages

Playwrights from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia took the inherited forms — including the English language itself — and made them carry other histories: colonisation and its aftermath, the clash of ancestral and imported orders, the city and the village, the returned exile. Wole Soyinka's drama, to take the

towering African example in English, fuses Yoruba ritual and cosmology with the structures of Greek and modern European tragedy, and the fusion is the meaning: neither inheritance is left unchanged. For students in Yaoundé, such plays raise the central question of this whole library in its sharpest form: what happens to English drama when English becomes one language among several in the playwright's ear? Bring that question, and your own multilingual ear, to every modern play you study.

Contemporary stages add devised work, verbatim theatre built from interviews, and performances that mix live and recorded presence. The study skill beneath all of it is unchanged: who speaks, who is silent, who watches, and what does the arrangement claim about the world?

6.4 A reading protocol for an unfamiliar play

First pass: read straight through, fast, imagining a stage. Note entrances and exits in the margin. **Second pass:** list, per scene, what changes — knowledge, power, intention. **Third pass:** choose three speeches and analyse their language closely (Chapter 3's tools). **Fourth pass:** read the stage directions and the setting as a text of their own. **Finally:** decide what production choice you would defend — a setting, a casting emphasis, a cut you would refuse to make — and be able to argue it from the text. A student who can argue a staging decision understands a play in a way a summary never proves.

6.5 Writing the drama essay

Drama essays earn their marks on double evidence: the words and the stage picture. Quote dialogue, but also cite arrangement — "alone on stage for the first time", " overheard", "spoken to the audience, not to the court". Use the present tense for stage action. Refer to characters, not actors, unless the question is about

a specific production. And remember the audience: a claim about what a moment does should be able to end with "...so the audience, who knows X, feels Y while watching Z". Practise that sentence shape until it is a habit.

Worked Example 6.1: A pause that speaks

In modern realist drama, a character who answers a direct question with a stage direction — *silence*, *pause*, *she does not answer* — has not left the conversation; the refusal is the answer. Imagine a wife asked whether she is happy, who replies by asking whether her husband would like more tea. The evasion tells the audience three things at once: the truth is unsayable in this room, she is skilled at the room's rules, and the marriage's peace is maintained by exactly such deflections, daily. Multiply that moment across a whole play and you have the realist method entire. When you meet a pause in a set text, never skip it: pauses are where modern plays keep their secrets, and an essay that analyses a silence demonstrates a reader who was truly listening.

Worked Example 6.2: Judging a world, feeling for a person

Consider a play in which a market woman, a colonial official and a village elder dispute the building of a road through sacred land. A purely empathic reading picks a side and suffers with it. A purely Brechtian reading maps the interests: wages, taxes, ancestors. The strongest essay does both in sequence: it shows how the play makes each position speakable from inside — each character gets one speech the audience cannot dismiss — and then shows how the staging of the final scene (who stands where, who is left alone in the light) delivers the play's judgement without a word of authorial comment. That two-step — sympathy distributed, judgement located in arrangement — is the mature way to write about serious modern drama of any origin.

Exercises — Chapter 6

31. Apply the four-pass protocol to one act of a play you have not studied before. Submit your scene-change list and one staging decision with its defence.
32. Find three significant silences or evasions in a modern play you know. Analyse what each one communicates and to whom.
33. Write an essay plan answering: "A play is not finished on the page." Discuss with reference to two plays, one earlier and one modern.

Answer guidance

34. Your staging decision should be arguable and text-based: a different choice must be possible, and your defence must quote or cite the text at least twice.
35. Distinguish silences: a silence of guilt, of tact, of defeat and of contempt look identical on the page and are entirely different in the theatre. Your analysis must say which, and how an actor or audience could tell.
36. Strong plans use the earlier play to show that performance-dependence is not a modern invention — direct address, doubling of parts and open staging all presume a live room — and the modern play to show how print itself (long directions, published texts) complicated the relationship.

Glossary of Dramatic Terms

Act — a major division of a play. **Anagnorisis** — recognition or discovery. **Aside** — a remark heard by the audience but not by other characters. **Blocking character** — the figure who obstructs the comic resolution. **Catharsis** — the purging or clarification of pity and fear in tragedy. **Chorus** — a commenting group or figure. **Climax** — the decisive peak of the action. **Denouement** — the untying of the plot at the end. **Dialogue** — exchanged speech. **Dramatic irony** — the audience knowing more than a character. **Exposition** — the conveying of background. **Hamartia** — the error that brings the tragic fall. **Hubris** — overweening pride or insolence. **Monologue** — an extended speech to others on stage. **Peripeteia** — reversal of fortune. **Protagonist** — the central figure. **Scene** — a unit of action in one place or with one grouping. **Soliloquy** — a speech alone, revealing inward thought. **Stage directions** — the playwright's instructions for performance. **Subplot** — a secondary line of action. **Subtext** — the meaning beneath the spoken words.

Further Reading and Next Steps

Read plays aloud, in company where possible, and see performance whenever you can — a modest staging teaches more about a scene than three summaries. Keep this book's habits: track what lines do, map what scenes change, judge speakers by their own words. The companion books in this library on poetry and on the novel will sharpen the same attention from other sides; drama is where that attention becomes public, spoken aloud in a room full of witnesses.

End of English Drama — From the Library of Maggie Enow.