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Level: **1st** Year MA
Module: British Literature
Lecture: **TWO**

THEATRE AS A RELATIONSHIP

SEEING AND READING

It is all too easy, when we begin to study a play as literature, to forget that it is written not to be read, but to be seen. Too often, we find ourselves reading plays as if they were novels which somehow got written in dialogue form. We look for the story and try to build up coherent fictional characters from a collection of the speeches they make and the actions they are given to perform. We go back and analyse the words on the page for intellectual or poetic 'meat', and lose sight of the fact that when we are in the audience we hear the dialogue only once, and must move from it to the meaning of the drama as a whole.

But the literature of the theatre is always theatre first and 'literature' second. If it is not dramatic, it is nothing. If we fail to experience it in its own right as a complete spectacle, with spatial and visual and other nonverbal elements as well as with all its verbal meanings, we are allowing ourselves to be sensitive to less than half of what it really gives us. If we lose sight of the fact that a theatrical performance takes place in a time which ticks away its two or three hours and cannot stop or go into reverse, then we are cutting ourselves off from one of theatre's most poignant constraints, one of its richest resources.

Theatre is, in the way the novel is not, a microcosm. The final curtain is final. We shall feel less involved in what happens on the stage if we let ourselves forget that for a real audience in a real theatre a play is a linear development which happens in a certain chosen order *once*.

This does not mean of course that to make sense of any play we have to go and see it. Obviously, seeing it is the ideal. If we can go to a performance we are putting ourselves in the vulnerable position of guinea-pigs. We can observe ourselves reacting to what happens on the stage and feel the tension or the shock of events almost as if we were living them. But it is not possible to go to see every play. Even specialist critics writing on dramatic authors admit that some works are so rarely performed that they have never had the opportunity to see them on stage. What we can try to do is reproduce as well as we can in our imaginations the conditions of the theatrical experience. We can allow ourselves a two- or three-hour space in which to read through a play in its entirety. We can imagine a set, a physical space for the action, the actors' voices, gestures, costumes. We can try to be aware of the interplay of the text and our own reactions, and when we come back to look again at where the sense of drama is coming from, we can begin to study it, not in a *literary* way, but by putting ourselves momentarily in the position of director. In our minds we can play with interpretation and space and lighting, before we look at the text in other ways. If we rush to abstract and analyse the less dramatic qualities of a play, we may find ourselves with a very dead play on our hands.

Perhaps to study a play properly we have still got to be able to feel we can *walk out* of it. It is not enough for a play to surround us in poetry if the poetry leaves us untouched. It is not enough for a play to present us with a serious ideological question if what we are experiencing bores us. In a play, perhaps more than in any other literary genre, the literary and intellectual qualities are functional. If a novel tells a story and a poem `takes the top of our heads off , a play which is dramatic always *puts us through it* in some way. When we turn back the pages to examine the serious things a playwright has *said* we should

not lose sight of how we felt about them as something we were initially *put through*. For drama is necessarily manipulative. The audience follows the play at the end of a taut thread of attention, and while the thread is still taut, the dramatist can pull us through pain or hilarity. But when the thread breaks, it is well and truly broken. If a play ceases to engage us, it may still be literature in some sense, but it is no longer drama and we are no longer able to look at it as such.

THE STAGE AS SPACE

The stage is first and foremost a space, a physical space in which something happens. Perhaps it has taken the critical insights of a gifted director to make us see this. Peter Brook's book, *The Empty Space*, is remarkable for cutting the ground from under the feet of much over-academic drama and criticism, and showing us what we should already have been all too aware of – that if we look at theatre as just another branch of written literature, we are killing something: theatre starts when a theatre opens its doors, when the area for the action is empty and waiting, when the audience begins to file in, expecting that space to be filled.

Playwrights, unlike readers and critics, have rarely ignored this fact. A play must be produced to become whole. A dramatic author must surely constantly bear in mind the circumstances in which his or her play is likely to be produced. A novelist or poet can write as if never to be heard, or at least can see what he or she writes as something like a message in a bottle, thrown to the mercy of the tides and currents, but a dramatist cannot afford that luxury. A play has a tangible, physical reality which it cannot attain without outside help.

So it is hardly surprising that the development of drama through the ages is intimately connected to the physical realities of stage production, to geography and climatic conditions, to scientific advances, and to the theories of stage reality, stage design and acting styles that went with them. The open-air theatres of ancient Greece would dampen most plays in our British winter climate. The vast arenas of ancient Rome fostered a certain kind of popular spectacle, probably more akin to pop-concerts or football matches or stunts with heavy goods vehicles in the function they performed than to what we call 'serious drama' today. From those open-air spaces even to the makeshift stages and modified farm-waggons and street theatre of medieval drama is an enormous jump. From the physical spaces of the morality plays to the fixed stage in a designated building is a huge jump again. The end of the patent system in the mid-19th-century, in opening the way towards the unrestricted use of buildings for theatrical purposes, is arguably as crucial to the development of contemporary British drama as the great theorists from Aristotle to Bertold Brecht.

This need not mean that when we read a play and do our best to visualise and experience it as if we were members of a real audience; we have to know every single fact about the conditions for which it was written. The accepted criterion of all great literature, whether poetry, prose or drama, is its survival *despite* changing, conditions: no matter how historically ignorant we are, it still has the power to communicate with us and move us. What it does mean is that we should be aware of the words and spaces in the text which tell us something about staging the play: we should use all the information we are given to make the play complete in our minds; whether we decide to go for authenticity or a new daring interpretation, we should always try to be as attentive and creative as the ideal director. We should work at keeping our feet on the ground as he or she does, conscious of the play as a lived, shared experience which takes place in a given space at a given time.

THE UNKNOWN INGREDIENT

A play cannot exist without an audience. To say that something special happens when a play is first seen and experienced by real people in a real theatre is a commonplace, but it is true, and it is something we may need to remind ourselves of as we sit straining to imagine a live performance, with the printed text of a play open in our laps. A play which is performed is not like a play which is read and seen in our heads. A first performance is not like a rehearsal, however ready and polished the rehearsal may be. A play needs us, in an even more obvious and immediate way than a novel or a poem needs a reader, in order to exist.

A play is an interaction of two sets of people, two kinds of reality, across a theoretical barrier which may be more or less visible. Whether we like it or not, whether we are relaxed in our seats, or on our feet shouting encouragement, or thoroughly uncomfortable, fidgeting and looking at our watches, our reaction is important. The feedback we give is a necessary part of the process. The atmosphere which emanates from us as audience can be sensed by the actors on stage and can modify their performance in subtle ways.

The ways in which we can be called upon to participate are almost infinitely variable. We may feel a very strong *divide* at the edge of a conventional stage, with a proscenium arch, and our share in the production may be largely a matter of atmosphere: actors and watchers alike may sense the fluctuations of an audience's attention through the quality of its silence; the occasional gasps or laughter of the people around us can be a potent force in the shaping of the dramatic experience. But often our involvement is more direct than this. Present-day audiences have become quite familiar with the device of using parts of the auditorium – balcony, boxes, gangways, or even ordinary seats – as performance space. In recent years it has become common for a dramatist to cross the invisible dividing line, or even wear it away almost completely. Possibly we are becoming more blasé about this phenomenon than is good for us or for the plays which use it extensively: but we are surely still sensitive to the reversal of roles when a 'member of the audience' suddenly begins to heckle the actors on stage in a loud and intrusive way and *interrupt the performance*. We may still feel momentary irritation or embarrassment, and that irritation or embarrassment may open the door to other, more complex emotional questions.

Much depends on the conventions of the kind of theatre we are watching and the way in which they shape our expectations. Children's theatre often offers considerable scope for interaction between actors and audience, and no one regards it as *gimmicky*. If, at a pantomime, we are asked to punch a giant inflatable sausage through the air, we probably have little trouble accepting our role as a traditional and necessary element in this kind of theatre. In the serious context of a Shakespearian tragedy we would probably find it at worst outrageously inappropriate and at best distracting. Yet Elizabethan audiences had no qualms about making their presence heard and felt! Perhaps we should do well to remind ourselves of how comparatively recently in the history of theatre our fixed theatres with their comfortable seats and electric lighting and sophisticated scene-changes developed, how comparatively recently audiences have been allowed to be comfortable and anonymous in their own space of darkness.

LAUGHING AND CRYING: Catharsis

If we can begin to appreciate how important we ourselves are as the audience in what happens in a theatre, it makes sense to ask ourselves why we go to a play. What do we expect to get out of it? Do we expect (list and foremost to be entertained? Do we expect to be improved in some way, intellectually or morally, hoping that when we step out into the night air afterwards we shall somehow be wiser or more sophisticated people? Do we hope to be transported into an imaginary world, or to be made to think objectively about our own? Do we feel that the job of real theatre is to move us profoundly, or do we feel that we are moved and disturbed enough by our everyday lives?

These questions are never resolved. We ask them again at each new theatrical experiment, perhaps even at each performance we witness. Twentieth-century dramatists have produced tremendous upheavals in the history of dramatic writing by answering them differently. Whether we are studying a contemporary farce, a Shakespearian history, a medieval morality play or a Greek tragedy, we cannot afford to ignore them. Are we to be changed by our experience? And if we are, how is that change to be effected?

Possibly the most seminal theoretician of the theatre of all time was Aristotle in the fourth century BC. Apart from analysing and classifying aspects of Greek theatre as it appeared to him, and developing a vocabulary of drama which is still largely in use today, Aristotle gave considerable thought to the ways in which a dramatic performance, and tragedy in particular, worked on its audience. At the centre of his descriptions of what constitutes plot and character and what conditions contribute to dramatic intensity, is the idea of *catharsis*. Critics have argued about whether the term itself is a medical one (purging) or whether it is a metaphor drawn from a more abstract, spiritual area of experience. But it is clear that Aristotle saw theatre as an intimate relationship between the ups-and-downs of characters on stage and the degree to which we as audience would feel for or with them. And it is clear too that how an audience felt was seen to be related to an audience's general moral and spiritual well-being: if we could feel pity and fear as we witnessed the inevitable and largely undeserved sufferings of characters on the stage, we would emerge from the dramatic experience somehow purified, better able to cope with the traumas and moral ambiguities of our own lives.

The most complete description Aristotle gives us of *catharsis* is not to be found with most of his other dramatic theory in the *Poetics*, but in the *Politics*, in the context not of drama but of music:

> Take pity and fear, for example, or again enthusiasm. Some people are liable to become possessed by the latter emotion, but we see that, when they have made use of the melodies which fill the soul with orgiastic feeling, they are brought back by these sacred melodies to a normal condition as if they had been medically treated and undergone a catharsis. Those who are subject to the emotions of pity and fear and the feelings generally will necessarily be affected in the same way; and so will other men in exact proportion to their susceptibility to such emotions. All experience a certain catharsis and pleasant relief. In the same manner cathartic melodies give innocent joy to men.' (Aristotle, *Politics*, quoted by Humphrey House in *Aristotle's Poetics* (Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), p. 107)

The business of drama is not only to bring us pleasure. It is also to make us *feel*, and, just as importantly, as we feel, to bring us back to a kind of balance. A good play with a sensitive audience is,

as we would say today, genuinely *therapeutic*. It is a *therapy* which ideally goes deep enough to modify our whole relationship with our ordinary existence.

This, in turn, has all sorts of implications for the ingredients of good dramatic writing. If feeling and, ultimately, moral growth, are the criteria, then the emphasis is on a certain kind of drama with a certain kind of plot and a certain kind of characters. It must be 'real' — but not too 'cal. The characters must be close — but not too 'close'. The structure must be 'tight' — but not so tight that the poetry itself is lost.

Aristotle may have been the first to formalise the phenomenon of theatre as a relationship, a tension between more and less realism, more and less distance, but it is a tension which has stayed with us ever since. Every century has come up with a different answer, a different version of what constitutes the ideal balance. Some of the greatest of European dramatists have changed the nature of theatre by defying that optimum balance in a new and revolutionary way. But we have not yet so far superseded Aristotle and his theories as to claim that catharsis (though we may call it by another name) can be left out of the equation. We surely still find strong emotion — pity, terror, or joy — a memorable part of what drama can do, and to some extent we still define other kinds of theatre against that memory.

PLAYS WITHIN PLAYS

When we see ourselves and our surroundings reflected in a mirror, we may react to the experience in various different ways. Most of the time we probably hardly think about the phenomenon, but only, 'Goodness, look at that spot!' or 'Have I forgotten to comb my hair today?' Sometimes we may sit in front of the glass in a dream, feeling as if something of ourselves or our world is actually caught deep inside it. Only very occasionally will we become aware of the mechanics of the reflecting process, the light, the angle, the dust on the surface.

In the theatre, when a playwright suddenly makes us aware of different levels of reality and our own relationship to them, he or she is exploiting what is potentially a vital dimension of every dramatic experience: in making us self-conscious about what we are seeing, he or she is also making us *think*.

The distancing techniques that Brecht used so systematically are one way of making an audience aware of the artifice of theatre and its real requirements in our own space and time. But there are other ways of questioning our relationship with what is happening on stage. Like a telescope which may be held at either end, *the play within a play* is just as likely to magnify what is happening as to distance it, but whatever we see, we are somehow aware of our hands on the barrel, the distorting lens next to our eye.

The play within a play may not immediately *alienate* us in the way the Brechtian screen does. After all, the fact that characters within the play we are watching are themselves putting on a dramatic performance does not *logically* invalidate those characters' reality. Real people do sometimes put on plays. But if we are at all impressionable, the secondary play will surely remind us that this is a play we are watching, that our relationship to it parallels the relationship of the play within a play to characters on stage, and that our life will go on outside the theatre, just as theirs does inside. When we draw inferences about the characters we are almost certainly half-aware that we ourselves are also subject to influence. We are not being shown what characters and events are, so much as *what theatre is*. And what is more *real* for us as audience than that vital relationship?

REFERENCES:

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