

Practical Criticism: Drama

Poetry and prose each have features that are peculiar to them: the main distinguishing feature of drama is that it is designed for performance in front of its audience. This is so obvious a remark as to be accepted by most students, without the realisation that this basic factor is the start and finish of most practical criticism of drama and dominates the way drama is written.

The problem is that when plays are studied for examinations they are usually read from a printed text, as are poems and novels, but right from the start this puts the student in a false position if he or she treats drama in the same way as poetry or prose. Drama was meant to be seen and heard, not read. Everything the student writes must be based on the written text, but that text needs to be enlivened by a vivid visual and auditory imagination. Every time a student reads a play he or she needs to be seeing a performance of it in his or her mind. Even if the student has seen a performance in the live theatre, the cinema or on television the dangers are still there. Each production of a play has its own individual interpretations and 'feel', and having seen one production the student can have his or her horizons hemmed in by that memory, and see the play purely in terms of the one production he or she has witnessed.

The artificial situation, that students find themselves in when appreciating drama, can create a number of problems. Shakespeare's plays present perhaps more problems than many others, because we only have the words and very little insight as to how Shakespeare wanted them performed. This applies to many dramatists, the general rule being that the more modern a play, the more the author will give specific instructions on how he wants his work staged, acted, and presented. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) gave the clearest possible instructions as to how he wished his plays to be staged and the lines to be spoken, and the *Preface* to his plays is often nearly as long as the play itself. However, in pre-Restoration drama all we have is the text and virtually no stage directions. This means that first of all we have to guess at how the play might have looked and how the lines might have been spoken.

Secondly, reliance on pure text with no insights from the author creates other problems. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Lady Macbeth makes it clear that she has breast-fed an infant, but it is also clear in the play that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have no children. Such inconsistencies can get totally out of proportion when the play is read rather than seen, and in this instance led to a famous essay attacking the very literal approach to criticism of A. C. Bradley, entitled "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" Reading *Macbeth* the student has time to note and dwell on the inconsistency. On stage the remark about breast-feeding makes a valuable point at the stage in the play, which is that Lady Macbeth is prepared to deny her basic feminine and human instincts in order to gain the crown for her husband. A great deal happens between that remark and the realisation that the Macbeths have no children, and in the theatre the audience have neither the time nor the inclination to dwell on the conflicting statements. Even if they are apparent, simple answers are available, the simplest of all being that Lady Macbeth's child died in infancy. The hurry and excitement of a dramatic performance can bulldoze its way over details such as this, so that they simply do not cross the audience's mind.

A minor problem can occur where music features largely in a play, and this has to be imagined by the student who is simply reading the text. The impact of the songs in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is huge, but obviously depends to quite a large extent on tunes and voices. The impact of pomp, ceremony, and processions in an Elizabethan play is also liable to be lost. A simple stage direction such as "Flourish. Enter Claudius, King of Denmark, Gertrude the Queen, Councillors, Polonius and his son Laertes, Hamlet" is a bare statement of fact when written. On stage it can be translated into a blare of ceremonial music that can make the audience jump in their seats, followed by a glorious pageant of extravagantly and luxuriously dressed characters streaming onto the stage in a riot of colour and noise. The entry of the full court of Denmark is visually immensely exciting, but it is an effect that a mere reading of the play does not necessarily bring out. Nor does a bare reading bring out the contrast between this scene and the one that immediately precedes it, with a few cold and frightened soldiers perched on the wind-swept battlements of Elsinore. As regards practical criticism, the student must be aware of what is suggested or implied in a passage, and the appeals to the imagination contained in bare stage directions.

Characterisation

The simplest method of characterising a person on stage is by what he or she does and says, from which the audience can form their own conclusions. Occasionally a Chorus or narrator figure will appear in a play to tell the audience what to think of a character, but for the vast majority of time our judgement of the characters is based solely on their actions on the stage, and their words. Insight into a character's private thoughts can be given by means of a soliloquy, or monologue, where the character speaks out loud to the audience, usually when he or she is alone on stage. There is a problem with realism here; we tend to think our thoughts, not speak them out loud, and any soliloquy or monologue needs to be examined for the subtlety and conviction with which it is blended into the main action.

It may sometimes be a strain on credibility to have a character speak out loud on an empty stage; it is much less of a strain to have another character speak about someone else. Look for points of characterisation in what other characters say about a character. Standard devices are to boost a major character before his or her entry by a preliminary speech praising or damning them, thus arousing tension and expectation in the audience. Remember that the character of the speaker can be judged from what they say, as well as the character of the person they are talking about. A grudging or generous comment about another character may tell the audience something about the other character, but it definitely tells them something about the personality of the speaker. It is a very effective and common technique to have a character who we know has no reason to praise or love another character speaking in his or her praise. Thus Enobarbus in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* does not like Cleopatra, but when even he is forced to speak in glowing terms of her immense presence and sensuality we know how strong these features must be to have overcome his other feelings. Similarly Claudius hates Hamlet, so when he says that the people of Denmark love Hamlet we recognise that this must be so abundantly true as to be accepted even by Hamlet's enemies. Another device is to have a character the audience hate or find ludicrous speak in praise of someone else, and thus damn him by association.

Imagery can play a vital part in forming our opinion of a character. If a person's speech is laced with references to illness, disease and decay, as Hamlet's is, then it does not take the audience long to associate these features with the character in question. When answering a question look out for mannerisms of speech, as suggested by spelling, stage directions or comments from other characters. Look closely for hints as to a character's appearance and age; in older plays these are frequently buried, or wrapped round in so many jocular remarks that they go unnoticed. The author of this book read *Twelfth Night* three times in detail as a student, and totally failed to recognise until he was told that there are several references in the play that make it clear Maria is a very small person. In a novel, character is often stated; in a play, it has to be deduced.

Plot

The majority of plays have a strong plot, and even those that do not, such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, obtain some of their effect by challenging the audience's expectation that there will be a plot. In modern plays the plot is more likely to be original, and sometimes merely an excuse for the author to characterise or make thematic points. Therefore in a modern play the balance between plot, characterisation, and themes can be a good starting point in a practical criticism.

A simple plot with limited settings and characters may not just be the product of a modern writer's desire to focus on characterisation and themes. Numerous expensive sets and a large number of actors make for a very expensive production in the modern theatre, and one of the great unsung influences on modern drama is cost-consciousness. A new young writer stands the best chance of seeing a play performed in a studio theatre, which has limited staging facilities and only a few actors on call. A play such as Toni Stoppard's *Jumpers* (1972) is an exception. Stoppard knew this play was destined for the prestigious and relatively rich National Theatre in London, and so could afford to write a play which required, among other things, a troupe of gymnasts and a huge television screen. A modern writer who wished to tell the story of Antony and Cleopatra would probably go to the film studios, not the live theatre. However, look for hints that a modern writer may be telling an old story in allegorical form. A simple dramatization of novel such as *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck (1902-68) may appear to be a story about two American vagrants; it can quite easily on stage be made into an allegory of the fall of man. Where a play is using an old and well-known story, such as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, look to see if the author is assuming any knowledge on the part of the reader, or deliberately varying the story or characterisation for effect.

A sub-plot is a feature of many plays. A sub-plot provides variety and a change of scene from the main plot, whilst at the same time keeping the audience in touch with the concerns and themes of the main plot. An excellent example of what a sub-plot can be is to be found in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where the main and sub-plots are carefully interleaved, in roughly alternating sequence. The sub-plot examines the themes of the main plot, but from a different viewpoint and with different characters. Certain characters and scenes overlap, ensuring that the play as a whole is not split down the middle. At the climax of the play, subplot and main plot are brought together, with the sub-plot concluding just before the main plot so that the latter is not reduced in effectiveness at its climax.

Sub-plots can also go gloriously wrong, though that fact alone need not ruin a play. In *The Relapse* by Sir John Vanbrugh the main plot starts off in fine style, but the sub-plot with its coarse and bawdy

concentration and complete lack of morality soon takes over. The sub-plot dominates more and more of the play, until the main issues in the main plot are left unresolved, and the sub-plot finishes the play in complete control, with only the merest token gesture towards the main plot. Other plays have parallel plots, such as Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which one story line provides much of the narrative and a comment on romantic love, whilst the other provides much of the comedy and a comment on real love.

Dialogue

Plays centre on dialogue, or the verbal exchanges between characters on stage. Very often individual characters will have their own specific and individual style of speaking, but remember that in appreciating drama it is not only what each individual character says that matters, but the skill of the author in linking characters to each other by means of what they say. Thus the effect of a word, sentence or speech on another character can be as important as the word, sentence or speech itself. One example is Jimmy Porter, 'the 'angry young man' who is the central figure in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. Jimmy is superb at launching darts at those to and with whom he speaks, darts that he knows will both have an explosive effect and demand that attention be paid to him. Or look at the punning and word play in many Restoration Comedies, where the pace of the exchange between characters seems to get faster and faster as each one tries to cap the other's wit.

Irony in all forms plays a crucial part in theatrical dialogue, and in many post-war plays it is the dominant feature - DRAMATIC IRONY. Remember that irony can be very subtle, and look for it in particular between characters at the extreme end of relationships those who are very close to each other, and those who are very far apart. In this, as in so many areas, it is the student's sensitivity that is tested. Irony is a delicate flower. The student who sees his or her task as bashing through a text for an examination is likely to trample on irony before they have even realise it is there.

General points

As with all practical criticism questions, look out for the prevailing tone of an extract, be it comic, serious, reflective, or whatever. Where comedy is the dominant effect, be careful to specify what the comic effect is, and how it is achieved, be it slapstick, bawdy or coarse humour, word-play, or emphasis on wit. Learn to follow a dialogue through: good dialogue shows characters changing, flexing, and developing their attitudes, so that the audience and the characters are at a different point towards the end of an extract from that which began it. Comment on the presence of stock types if characters appear to be cast in this mould. Examples might be the malcontent or bastard in Jacobean drama; the stupid, unsophisticated rustic or country bumpkin; the fop or dandy in Restoration comedy; the old man or woman desperately trying to pretend they are young; the star-struck lovers.

References:

Martin Stephen, *English Literature*. London: Pearson Education, 2000.