

## INTERPRETATION OF DRAMA

*The aim of this article is to introduce you to the study of drama. Unit 1 of this article present some basic issues involved in the interpretation of drama. It tries to show you how to read a play, how to get the most out of this experience. It introduces to you the theatrical modes prevalent today and also gives an overview of Shakespeare's drama. Units 2 and 3 help you to make a practical application of the methodology outlined in Unit 1. Unit 2 deals with a full-length play.*

*The activities in these units will help you to get into the habit of reading a text closely and attentively. This, in turn, will help you to arrive at interpretations on your own. After you finish studying this block, you should be able to read and interpret drama on your own.*

This unit will introduce you to the different issues involved in the interpretation of drama .It will help you locate the differences between reading and watching a play. It will also introduce you to different modes of theatrical presentations in the twentieth century.

Do follow the instructions and do all the activities-these will help you to understand the concepts and make them more concrete for you. The approximate time needed to do these activities is mentioned. But, remember, this can vary depending on the people who do them and the circumstances under which they do them

### What is drama?

All of you must have read plays .Some of you may have acted in plays. Some of you may have even directed or produced plays. But all of you, I am sure, must have seen plays. Do I hear loud protests?! Then answer the following questions:

- Do you go to plays staged in your village town city?. These need not be plays only in English. These could also be staging of scenes from our epics like the Ramayana (every Dushera) or the Mahabharata.

- Do you watch serials on television?

- Do you go to the movies?

If you have answered yes any one of these questions, then you definitely have been exposed to drama.

### How to read a play?

Most of you will now (i.e for this course) be only reading plays and we will try and interpret them together. So, the important point to remember is this - the words on the page are meant to be spoken, to come alive. So, the best way to read a play is to immerse you totally in it and try and read it at one sitting. Can you do this? If you can, find some time for yourself, lock yourself in a room and open up your imagination. How do you do this? Let's take it one step at a time, and first go back to Aristotle. After all, the word drama has its origins in the Greek word *drain* which means to do, and the word *scene* comes from the Greek word *scana* which means to see.

What do you look for when you read or watch a play? Aristotle suggested six focal points:

- **Mythos:** This is where all interpretation starts- the story and the plot, the narrative and the causality behind it.

- **Ethos:** Think of the environment in which the play is written- the intellectual climate the cultural settings, the customs, and the manners relevant to the play you are reading. Look again at Block 1 Unit 3 for more ideas.

- **Lexis:** Look at the style. Is it harsh, poetic, heavy-handed,...? What kind of language is used? Is there a dialect or a register?

- **Dianoia:** What is the emotion evoked in you? Is there an ideology you can identify with? What are the feelings, the sentiments of the dramatist? Are they similar to yours? Look again at Block 1 Unit 4- this unit will help you identify more such contexts in which literature is

produced and consumed.

- **Opsis:** This refers to an important element in drama- what you can see on the stage- the setting, the props the costumes. When you read the play, you will have to imagine these. Look carefully at the stage directions- these will help you in this.

- **Melos:** This integral part of drama- music- will, once again, have to be imagined by you. Are there chants by a chorus? Are there dance rhythms? Do the songs help to elaborate the characterization?

Before reading a play, look at the opening directions carefully. These will normally be a description of the stage: the set and the atmosphere. Visualise this set and hold this mental picture throughout your reading. As you read on, you will come across instructions to the actors< normally within parenthesis, e.g. “(meekly)” “(faltering)” (snapping)”. These obviously give you an indication of what kind of person a particular character is meant to be either throughout the play –scene or in a particular situation. Your task is to try and visualize how a character can be meek or falter or snap. The stage directions will also give physical descriptions of characters- visualize these too. Try and form a mental picture of all the actors who are on the stage at a particular time, but shift your focus to the speaker. Remember there are no zoom-lenses or close-ups in the theatre to tell you whom the focus should be on , and less so when you read.

Also try and imagine the sound of the spoken words or even the stage directions. For example, if the stage directions say “(knock on the door)”, what kind of knocking is this? Is it timid, harsh, .loud? Also try and hear any music that might be mentioned.

### **What kind of play is it?**

You must have read about schools of drama and it is helpful to know to which school of drama a play belongs. We must remember that each school of drama has come into existence as a reaction to a previous school. As in all things, the old gives way to the new, which in its turn, given time, will also, becoming old, give way to another new school or movement. To talk of movements, of changes, we need to be familiar with terms and concepts, with labels.

Let us start with the term classical. This refers to art forms in accordance with ancient Greek or Roman models. Classical drama has its origin in religion and particularly in Greece, drama grew out of the worship of Dionysus, the god of fertility. The fifth century B.C. (Aeschylus-525-455 B.C.) is considered the high period of Greek drama. The term neoclassical is applied to work done more recently, but in the classical style. It is applied to certain beliefs and practices of the European literature world of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In drama, neoclassicism implies a strict adherence to the Aristotelian precepts of the three unities of action, time and place: the use of a chorus as an integral part of the whole to comment on, interpret or share in, an action: the avoidance of violence on stage: the use of only royal or noble characters in tragedy: and the use of language which is highly poetic and correct.

Through a reaction to the rigid rules of neoclassicism was born romanticism a prominent movement in the nineteenth century. Romanticism however expressed itself more through the medium of poetry than through drama. Victor Hugo in his Preface to Cromwell in 1827 puts forth his views on the romantic ideal and says that the only rules to be followed are the rules of nature. The emphasis is on feeling rather than on thought. Under this label also falls the concept of the well-made play popularized by the French playwrights Eugene Scribe and Victorien Sardou. Here, like in our commercial films, the playwright pits good against evil and virtue against vice. Needless to add, virtue triumphs against all odds. The style of acting is bold, accompanied by confident gestures and rhetorical speeches. The costumes indicate the social standing and the moral conditions of the character. The scenery is spectacular, the atmosphere showing the audience the quality of vice or virtue, danger or safety. The emphasis is on an efficient plot and a satisfied audience.

But we must remember that it was in the sixteenth century, with Elizabethan drama, that English drama first made its presence felt. The major figures are Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and, of course, William Shakespeare, who emerges as one of the greatest dramatists of all

times. We will say more about him later. In the seventeenth century we have John Webster: the comedy of manners, which began with the Restoration, continued into the eighteenth century.

### **Modes of theatrical presentation**

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, drama took on different labels, depending on the mode of presentation. Let us first look at realism. George Bernard Shaw called the plays of Scribe and Sardou *mindless entertainment*- the two French dramatists in the romantic-moralistic tradition- and inaugurated realism. The aim of the realists is to put a slice of life on the stage and the first person to do this was Henrik Ibsen in *A Dolls House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881). The realists avoid poetic language. Their characters use the language of every day life. The realists try to put on stage what they can verify by observing ordinary, real life. They want their audience to be completely convinced of the reality of the world of the stage. To achieve this, Johan August Strindberg, another exponent of realism, avoided dividing his play into acts, said that there were to be no visible musicians on the stage and demanded a total blackout in the auditorium. He wanted nothing to distract the audience from being one with the play being performed on stage.

An offshoot of realism is *naturalism*, where, in addition to realism, there is also a deterministic thesis, in which a human being is a creature of circumstances, and is not always directly responsible for what happens. This is a belief which states that acts of the will, natural events or social changes are settled and decided by earlier causes. Johan August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888) is an example of naturalistic drama. The naturalist would not hesitate to show the seamier side of life on stage. Thus Ibsen, in his *Ghosts*, deals with a subject like venereal disease. The naturalists present "a specially angled view of real life" (Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* 1:6). To quote Styan again:

However reaction against the theatre of psychological realism

And of ordinary speech and behavior was relentless throughout

The twentieth century. We shall see how the forces against it themselves divided into symbolism and expressionism.

So now, what is *symbolism*? We are aware of the symbols in poetry and fiction. We are also aware of universal symbols, something concrete standing for something abstract- a red rose for love: white for purity: and in our context a garland for respect. But what is the symbolist mode of theatre? Let us first look at it at the basic level. Suppose a wall is needed in a particular play. The director has two options-either to do it realistically and have a wall as a stage prop or to do it symbolically and make an actor stand for a wall-this wall can be removed easily, by just making the actor leave the stage. But at a deeper level, life could be represented as a dream resulting in a more lyrical and imaginative stage. Once again, the language becomes poetic and the stage sets abstract, with the emphasis being on atmosphere and not locale. Ritualism and a unification of the arts, i .e. poetry, music and dance, are the symbolist's ideal. The actors usually wear masks. The use of height and space, vertical and horizontal lines, lighting creating elongated shadows-all these techniques are used to symbolize the mood of actors, who could be made to behave like puppets. In England, symbolist drama, as such, was practised among others by T.S. Eliot in his *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), which deals with the martyrdom of the archbishop Thomas a Becket in the twelfth century.

The Theatre of the Absurd also falls, in a sense, within the symbolist tradition. Made famous by Samuel Becket, in his *Waiting For Godot* (1952), it was followed in Britain by Harold Pinter, especially in his later plays like *Old Times* (1971). These plays have no formal plot or characterization and because of this the characters seem as if they have no purpose in life and emphasize "the monotony and repetitiveness of time in human affairs" (Styan, *Modern Drama*, 2:126).The playwrights adopt stylistic methods which lend themselves to farce and comic form, reinforcing the concept of the *absurd*.

Now, what is *expressionism*? It is a movement which tries to present a reality of the mind, the internal world, rather than external realities, the external world. In these plays the atmosphere

is dreamlike: the décor has bizarre shapes and loud colours: the plot and structure consist of a sequence of episodes or incidents strung together: the characters, frequently, are not even given names emphasizing their collective nature representing a particular social group: the dialogue is poetic: and the actors and directors have the freedom experiment of this kind of drama. So was O'Neill, in *The Hairy Ape* (1922).

An offshoot of expressionism is the epic theatre made famous by Bertolt Brecht with plays like *Mother Courage* (1941) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1945). Epic theatre is an undramatic theatre, which insists on the detachment of the audience from the action on stage. This theatre is a comment on the social or political conditions of other epochs, providing important information to the audience. It is anti-illusionist where the stage becomes "a lecture platform, a laboratory in which models of human behavior are examined, tested and evaluated" (Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama*:65).

A word of caution- we have simplified all these concepts and terms for an easy understanding. It is not always possible to put a playwright under any one of the above labels. Sometimes dramatists use a combination of approaches. Both Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, though predominantly realistic, also combine expressionism in their plays. Anton Chekhov, also basically a realist, veered around to introducing symbolism in his plays. Johan August Strindberg started writing historical plays, moved to realism and naturalism, and ended up with expressionism. So when you read a play, keep the above guidelines in mind and see whether you can identify which mode a playwright uses. This will help in your interpretation of the play. If you look again at Tennessee Williams "The Glass Menagerie" you can see how realism and expressionism exist in the same play.

### **Shakespeare**

The discussion above might have given you the impression that each dramatist writes, consciously or unconsciously, in one or more modes (according to one or more schools) and that the play, wherever it is produced, should always conform to that mode (those modes). This, however, is far from the truth. A given drama can be produced in various modes. Let us take the plays of Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare is one of the greatest dramatists of all times. Eric Bentley says that he is "the most read and the most performed of all dramatists"(The Playwright as Thinker:232):J.L. Styan refers to him as "master of them all"(Modern Drama,2:70) and T.S. Eliot in his *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* gives the reason for this view. He says:

In a play of Shakespeare you get several levels of significance.  
For the simplest auditor there is the plot, for the more thoughtful  
The character and conflict of character, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm,  
And for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a  
Meaning which reveals itself gradually.

( In Styan, *Modern Drama* 2:7)

Another proof of Shakespeare's perennial appeal lies in the fact that his plays have been performed from the sixteenth century to present times, and I am sure they will be staged even in the future. England has a Royal Shakespeare Company which was established after the World Wars. Great directors like Peter Brook and Peter Hall have staged different interpretations of various plays of Shakespeare. The text remains the same and will always read well. But the reputation of the directors can rise or fall depending on the way they produce plays. Ralph Berry in his book on Shakespeare says:

In choosing one of his (Shakespeare) dramas a director reanimates it with the spirit of his own society and day. In addition to his personal vision, he will identify some current social assumptions and preoccupations in his production. ... So the history of Shakespearean productions is always a guide of sorts to the times

(Changing Styles in Shakespeare:1)

A director has the freedom to produce a play and color it with his/her interpretation. In

1962, Peter Brook presented King Lear not as a majestic king wronged by his daughters but as a cranky old man, difficult to live with. In 1970, Laurence Olivier depicted Shylock (The Merchant of Venice) in such a way that the character evoked sympathy from the audience. The perception of Hamlet has also changed- Hamlet used to be played by actors even 64 years old. But today, any actor aspiring to play Hamlet cannot be more than 40. This is because, for more than a generation now, the West has emphasized youth and youth means those under 30. Another change is that the Hamlets now are no longer noble nobility but tend towards being more middle-class- virile, individual men in revolt against the Establishment. This is reiterated by John Elsom in his Postwar British Theatre (1976) when he says that «suave actors had been replaced by rough ones as heroes, metropolitan accents by regional ones, complacent young men by angry ones, stylish decadents by flustered: working-class” anti-heroes”(34)

Now let us go back to the chart you prepared in your last activity. Let’s look at the kinds of drama prevalent in the late nineteenth and twentieth century and see how Shakespeare’s plays have been produced under these labels.

Realism- this school aims to portray real-life on the stage. In 1881, the Saxe-Meiningen Company put up Julius Caesar in London. They rehearsed wearing the costumes required, so that actors could grow accustomed to wearing unfamiliar clothes. The crowd scenes were so realistic that when Mark Antony delivered his famous speech, it was not as if on the stage to an audience but as if this audience were actually the citizens of Rome. Every detail, on stage and off-stage, was so arranged as to produce the effect of real life. And the audience felt the power of Antony’s oratory, not from a distance, but as if they were taking part in the action.

Let us move on to Symbolism .In 1912, Edward Craig produced Hamlet at the Moscow Art Theatre. The sets were symbolic, and used to create a mood of “a lonely soul in a dark place”. Craig used to curtain so that the audience could see the change in scenes being made by people moving about on the stage, reminding the audience of the symbolism involved. He used grey transparent canvas fitted on to light wooden frames, leaving the audience plenty of scope to read meaning into those settings. Craigs Hamlet was a giant of a man, his King was masked with a large head, and he wanted all characters to behave like puppets. The court itself was depicted as faces seen through holes cut in a golden cloth. The players used wires to fly in through windows. Craigs purpose was to emphasize the fact that this play was a struggle between the material and the spiritual worlds.

In 1921, in New York, Macbeth was directed by Arthur Hopkins. The sets were designed by Robert Jones who used symbolist and expressionist styles to convey the mood of the play. Jones believed that directors should immerse themselves in the plays they want to put up, to such an extent that they are totally involved in the action and the atmosphere of the play. Jones believed in emphasizing reality: not of physical objects, but of the mind. So, for Macbeth, Jones set out to emphasize the spiritual relationships in the play by creating an abstract background. Black backdrops were used for all the main scenes. Three silver masks were hung above the stage- these were used to represent mystic forces at work upon the characters. His set consisted of Gothic arches, which seemed to reach Heaven, and topple over whenever required. The obsessive quality of the minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the plotting and the planning, the sinister atmosphere were all well brought out by these stage designs.

Today, Shakespeare plays are being revived in avant-garde adaptations. We have documented a few for you. The Merchant of Venice was performed in 1994 by the Royal Shakespeare Company and directed by David Thacker. The director transformed Venice into a 1980s London stock market where transactions were conducted by telephone and computer. Shylock was presented as a desperate father who sought revenge only after he was betrayed. In November 1994, Peter Sellers also produced the same play, but he transposed the drama to Venice and depicted Shylock as an African-American moneylender in conflict with people with racist tendencies. Portia was portrayed as a Chinese-American living in Bel Air.

Coming closer home, we have records of two theatre companies from Britain and Australia respectively who have relocated *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the sand dunes of Rajasthan! And we have playwright and producer Mahesh Dattani, along with director Michael Walling, enacting *The Tempest* against the background of Indian folk theatre in Bangalore, in February 1995. Prospero wears a dhoti and Ariel dresses and dances like Lord Krishna. Greek gods in the drama have been substituted by their Indian counterparts. The script and dialogue remain true to the original. But, Dattani says, "We have tried to incorporate the rich Indian magic that abounds in Indian heritage into the tapestry of the play" (*The Week*, 26 Feb.1995:60).

In this unit, we have:

- discussed the differences between reading and watching a play:
- suggested six focal points to help you read/watch a play with understanding:
- shown you how to use these six focal points for interpreting a play:
- talked about different modes of theatrical presentation prevalent in the twentieth century:

and

- sketched for you the different perceptions of Shakespeare that are prevalent today.