

Emergence of Modern Drama

Contents

This chapter addresses emergence of modern drama, including discussion about basic concepts, historical background, some prominent figures, and modern dramatic works. Related tasks are composed in pre- and post-reading activities.

Objectives

Finishing this chapter you are expected to:

1. know some terminologies related to modern drama
2. know the historical period of modern drama
3. know some prominent figures and works of modern drama
4. be able to distinguish between pre-modern and modern drama after scrutinizing the excerpts of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*
5. understand the effects of social condition in modern era upon modern drama

Meeting 2

1.1. Pre-reading Activity

1. Read the quotation from a character in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599) below. Give your comment about the meaning of Jaques' statement.

JAIQUES. All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;

Taken from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (1996:622) compiled by Wordsworth Editions Limited

2. Figure 1.2 and 1.2 below are adaptations from the well-known scene of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* which was written in about 1595.



Figure 1.1¹



Figure 1.2²

Explain the differences between figure 1.1 and figure 1.2, especially in terms of characters portrayal and settings.

1.2. Reading Activity

Modern Drama: A Brief Historical Review

Drama develops as dramatists always search for improvements. The drama we know today has undergone changes and those changes are influenced by the world's dynamism throughout the ages. History of western drama has recorded four great eras emerging in parallel with four great ages in Europe; they are Classic Greek and Roman Drama, English Renaissance Drama, French Neoclassical Drama, and Modern Drama (King, 2007). Each era produces its own dramatic style that differs from one another; for examples: Sophocles of Classic Greek Drama, who uses **chorus**³ to address characters' dilemmatic situation, is different from William Shakespeare of English Renaissance Drama, who emphasizes sophisticated diction to trigger dramatic tension; or Jean Racine of French Neoclassical Drama, who remains formal in composing lines involving characters' feelings, is different from Henrik Ibsen of Modern Drama, who employs flexible words to facilitate spontaneous emotions.

¹ Taken from <http://www.aitkin.k12.mn.us/OneAct/oneact2013/oneact2013.html>

² Taken from <http://transmedialshakespeare.wordpress.com/category/slide-showsphoto-galleries/>

³ A group of singers and dancers in Classic Greek drama who comment on what is happening accompanied by music

Regarding Modern Drama, we need to know that this era was actually preceded by two major events, Industrial Revolution and French Revolution. Both happened in the last half of 18th century and influenced the birth of modernism. Modernism, according to Krasner (2012:3), was the condition in which tradition was found to be lacking and the task of making sense of ourselves and the world could no longer depend on authority, religion, or antiquity. It represented massive social, economic, philosophical, and artistic changes.

Instilling the spirit of modernism, modern dramatists are concerned about social issues and, consequently, drama becomes a medium for social criticism. Modern drama rejects traditional convention of formalities that possibly limits dramatists' expressions and pays more attention to the implied contents or suggested ideas instead. In this case, the spirit of **realism**⁴ is considered as one of the foundations of modern drama. The spirit itself is well-delivered by Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian dramatist who is celebrated as the father of modern drama. His works, such as *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), provide vivid description of normal human beings and their problems in familiar and realistic settings. Realism in Britain, particularly, came to prominence when Oscar Wilde shocked the Victorians with his wit in the late 19th century. One of his most famous dramas is *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) which criticizes Victorian etiquettes. Another celebrated figure is George Bernard Shaw whose concern about women's role is portrayed in *Arms and the Man* (1894) and *Saint Joan* (1923).

The style of modern drama changed significantly after the world wars in the first half of 20th century. Destruction and chaos faced by hopeless people due to the wars played an important role in the emergence of **Theatre of the Absurd**⁵. One of the prominent figures of Theatre of the Absurd is Samuel Beckett. His masterpiece, *En Attendant Godot* or *Waiting for Godot* (1953), presents the characters whose lives are wasted for endless talks and arguments while waiting for something that, somehow, cannot be defined. As a result, characters' actions violate conventional activities. Beckett's works have influenced many dramatists, including Edward Albee who was awarded **Pulitzer Prize**⁶ for *A Delicate Balance* in 1966.

1.3. Post-reading Activity

1.3.1. Group Discussion

Below are excerpts taken from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). Read carefully.

⁴ Generally, accuracy in the portrayal of life or reality, or verisimilitude (Morner & Rausch, 1991:182)

⁵ A kind of drama growing out of the philosophy of existentialism and flourishing in Europe and America in the 1950s and 1960s (Morner & Rausch, 1991:1)

⁶ Award given for achievement in art and literature

ROMEO AND JULIET

(Taken from Act II, Scene 1 - when Juliet appears at a window in her house while Romeo is anticipating her presence in Capulet's orchard. They are deeply in love.)

ROMEO. She speaks:-
O, speak again, bright angel, for thou art
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,
As is a winged messenger of heaven
Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes
Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him
When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds
And sails upon the bosom of the air.

JULIET. O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

ROMEO (Aside). Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

JULIET. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;-
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name.
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title:- Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

ROMEO. I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptised;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

JULIET. What man art thou that thus bescreen'd in night,
So stumblest on my counsel?

ROMEO. By a name
I know not how to tell thee who I am:
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,
Because it is an enemy to thee;
Had I it written, I would tear the word.

JULIET. My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words
Of that tongue's utterance, yet I know the sound:
Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?

ROMEO. Neither, fair saint, if either thee dislike.

JULIET. How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?
The orchard-walls are high and hard to climb;
And the place death, considering who thou art,
If any of my kinsmen find thee here.

ROMEO. With love's light wings did I o'er-perch these walls;
For stony limits cannot hold love out:
And what love can do, that dares love attempt;
Therefore thy kinsmen are no let to me.

JULIET. If they do see thee, they will murder thee.

ROMEO. Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye
Than twenty of their swords: look thou but sweet,
And I am proof against their enmity.

JULIET. I would not for the world they saw thee here.

ROMEO. I have night's cloak to hide me from their sight;
And but thou love me, let them find me here:
My life were better ended by their hate
Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.

JULIET. By whose direction found'st thou out this place?

ROMEO. By love, who first did prompt me to inquire;
He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes.
I am no pilot; yet, wert thou as far
As that vast shore wash't with the furthest sea,
I would adventure for such merchandise.

Taken from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (1996:254)
compiled by Wordsworth Editions Limited

A DOLL'S HOUSE

(Taken from Act III - when Torvald Helmer is about to open the letter from Krogstad, his co-worker. The letter reveals that Nora, Torvald's wife, forged her late father's signature when she got a loan from Krogstad without being known by Torvald. Krogstad blackmails Nora in order to save his job because he is about to be fired by Torvald.)

HELMER. *(Kisses her forehead)*. Good night, my little singing bird. Sleep well, Nora, I'll just read through my letters.

He takes the letters into his room and shuts the door behind him.

NORA. *(Gropes around her, wild-eyed, seizes Helmer's cloak, wrap it round herself, and whispers quickly, hoarsely, spasmodically)*. Never see him again. Never, never, never. *(Throws her shawl over her head.)* And never see the children again either. Never, never. Oh, that black icy water. Oh, that bottomless...! If only it were all over! He's got it now. Now he's reading it. Oh no, no! Not yet! Torvald, goodbye... and my children.

She rushes out in the direction of the hall; at the same moment Helmer flings open his door and stands there with an open letter in his hand.

HELMER. Nora!

NORA. *(Shrieks)* Ah!

HELMER. What is this? Do you know what is in this letter?

NORA. Yes, I know. Let me go! Let me out!

HELMER. *(Holds her back)*. Where are you going?

NORA. *(Trying to tear herself free)*. You mustn't try to save me, Torvald!

HELMER. *(Reels back)*. True! Is this true what he writes? How dreadful! No, no, it can't possibly be true.

NORA. It is true. I loved you more than anything else in the world.

HELMER. Don't come to me with a lot of paltry excuses!

NORA. (*Taking a step towards him*). Torvald... !

HELMER. Miserable woman... what is this you have done?

NORA. Let me go. I won't have you taking the blame for me. You mustn't take it on yourself.

HELMER. Stop play-acting! (*Locks the front door.*) You are staying here to give an account of yourself. Do you understand what you have done? Answer me! Do you understand?

NORA. (*Looking fixedly at him, her face hardening*). Yes, now I'm beginning to understand.

HELMER. (*Walking up and down*). Oh, what a terrible awakening this is. All these eight years... this woman who was my pride and joy... a hypocrite, a liar, worse than that, a criminal! Oh, how utterly squalid it all is! Ugh! Ugh! (*Nora remains silent and looks fixedly at him.*) I should have realized something like this would happen. I should have seen it coming. All your father's irresponsible ways... Quiet! All your father's irresponsible ways are coming out in you. No religion, no morals, no sense of duty... Oh, this is my punishment for turning a blind eye to him. It was for your sake I did it, and this is what I get for it.

NORA. Yes, this.

HELMER. Now you have ruined my entire happiness, jeopardized my whole future. It's terrible to think of. Here I am, at the mercy of a thoroughly unscrupulous person; he can do whatever he likes with me, demand anything he wants, order me about just as he chooses... and I daren't even whimper. I'm done for, a miserable failure, and it's all the fault of a feather-brained woman!

NORA. When I've left this world behind, you will be free.

Taken from *Literature: The Evolving Canon* (1996:1351-1352) written and compiled by Sven Birkerts

Now, answer the following questions. Take some suitable quotations to support your answer.

1. In terms of style, what are the differences between the lines of dialogue in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Doll's House*? State your opinion.
2. In terms of characters, what are the differences between Romeo and Torvald in treating their beloved women; and between Juliet and Nora in treating their beloved men? Explain your answer.
3. Romeo-Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Torvald-Nora in *A Doll's House* are couples who love each other but, at the end of the story, their love lives end differently. Romeo and Juliet remain together and believe in their love beyond anything; furthermore, they commit suicide only to defend their love. On the other hand, Torvald and Nora eventually separate after dealing with complicated domestic problems. Which one is likely to happen to modern-day people, the like of Romeo-Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* or the like of Torvald-Nora in *A Doll's House*? Why?

1.3.2. Individual Assignment

You have read that Industrial Revolution and French Revolution influence the emergence of modernism. Thus, modern drama is affected by social condition following those historical events. In what ways do you think the social condition at that time affects modern drama?