

## Intrinsic Elements in Modern Drama

### Contents

This chapter addresses characteristics of modern drama, specifically discussion about intrinsic elements: character, plot, setting, dialogue, and theme. Related tasks are composed in pre- and post-reading activities.

### Objectives

Finishing this chapter you are expected to:

1. know characteristics of intrinsic elements (character, plot, setting, dialogue and theme) in modern drama
2. know the significance of intrinsic elements in shaping the form and structure of modern drama after scrutinizing the excerpts of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabbler* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*
3. be able to distinguish between the product of realist and absurdist theatre, based on their intrinsic qualities, after scrutinizing the figures taken from both theatrical production
4. understand the variety and universality of subjects and themes in modern drama and their significance for humanity

### Meeting 3

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#### 2.1. Pre-reading Activity

Before discussing the subject in this chapter, let us brush up on your understanding about intrinsic elements.

1. What is the importance of intrinsic elements in a drama?
2. What are the intrinsic elements in drama? Explain each of them.

#### 2.2. Reading Activity

##### Revisited Intrinsic Elements

A drama is composed by some intrinsic elements working as inseparable units. This notion is implemented by modern dramatists in many ways. The old-established paradigm of character, plot, setting, etc. is experimented and elaborated resulting in various kinds of

dramatic works. There is a sense of innovation; dramatists are eager to create something new. Ibsen has started it by introducing real to life character, such as Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*. This character has shocked the society for her being deviant, in terms of attitude and standpoint, challenging moral standards that strictly divide the role men and women. Like Nora, other characters in Ibsen's prominent works come from upper to middle class who have to face complicated horizontal problems, the problems that might be experienced by any ordinary human being. Exposing characters' conflicts and psychological problems in domestic settings, Ibsen has successfully revealed the issues that were taboo to discuss prior the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The laws of conventional plot are still used in early modern drama. Ibsen himself employs a well-made plot; the plot that observes the traditional unities of time, place and action (King, 2007:71). The plot contains a series of events results from complicated conflicts among characters. To some extent we may find modification in terms of act and/or scene composition; for example, the new version of serious drama is not tied to the formality of five-act play used in many Renaissance works. Another modification happens in terms of structure. Open ending, which does not give conclusive resolution, is used to replace closed ending, which offers decisive resolution. Nevertheless, closed ending is still employed in some modern works.

Realist drama avoids generalized setting. A place is described comprehensively including its specific props and detailed decors. Consequently, characters exist in a defined location. Many modern dramatists employ setting as both mirror of the real world and specific symbol. It may provide significant clues which lead readers or audience to the theme, the soul of drama. Thus, scrutinizing the details of setting and its changes throughout the drama might help readers of audience in conducting critical analysis.

Dialogue in modern drama represents natural human speech. Careful verses, which were commonly used in dialogues of the past great dramas, are replaced by plain language. The sense of common expression containing spontaneity, pauses, hesitation and interruption can be felt although the dialogue itself remains artificial. This is in line with the argument from Anton Chekhov who says, "Avoid 'choice' diction. The language should be simple and forceful" (Pickering, 2005:18). Chekhov's statement represents the spirit of many modern dramatists, especially those who refer to realism and **naturalism**<sup>7</sup> in composing dialogues in their works.

The concepts of well-defined character, well-made plot, realistic setting, and true to life dialogue that are popular in early modern drama were gradually revisited and changed by dramatic works in later years. In this case, radical changes are done by Theatre of the Absurd.

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<sup>7</sup> A literally movement that emerged in France, America, and England during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that emphasizes biological and socioeconomic determinism in fiction and drama (Morner & Rausch, 1991:145)

We won't find sufficient information about characters and settings in absurdist works since the characters lack motivation and exist in unclear settings. Conventional actions are missing because there is no obvious exposition, climax, or resolution. The plot does not develop the way it does in realist drama. Strange interaction happens because dialogues among characters are not cohesive and tend to be disconnected.

Dramatic works in modern era carry out broad themes. Those themes do not only concern about issues faced by majority of people but also taboo and sensitive subjects experienced by minorities, including the problems faced by domesticated women, particular ethnic mix (African Americans, for example), and homosexuals. According to Abbotson (2003), modern dramatists' concern covers the subjects related to social attitudes toward death, religion, women, or ambition. Some themes include specific character relationships, such as those between siblings, couples, or parents and children, or general relationships between people, such as those created by a sense of community, growing up, or aging. Themes also highlight specific areas of concern, including attitudes toward work, illness, and war. Each theme is developed by considering more specific social, moral, and political issues to which it can be related.

### 2.3. Post-reading Activity

#### 2.3.1. Group Discussion

1. Look carefully at figure 2.1, figure 2.2, figure 2.3, and figure 2.4 below. Which figures belong to realist theatre? Which figures belong to absurdist theatre? Relevant argument, which is based on the notions of realist and absurdist theatre about intrinsic elements, is needed to support your answer.



**Figure 2.1**<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2.2**<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Taken from <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/oct/20/what-to-say-about-endgame>



**Figure 2.3**<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2.4**<sup>11</sup>

2. The following excerpts are description of settings taken from two prominent modern dramas; excerpt 1 is taken from Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and excerpt 2 is taken from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Read carefully. In what ways do you think the description of setting in excerpt 1 represent characteristics of modern drama? In what ways do you think the description of setting in excerpt 2 represent characteristics of modern drama? State your opinion and take some quotations from the excerpts to support it.

Excerpt 1:

*A spacious, handsome, and tastefully furnished drawing room, decorated in dark colours. In the back, a wide doorway with curtains drawn back, leading into a smaller room decorated in the same style as the drawing-room. In the right-hand wall of the front room, a folding door leading out to the hall. In the opposite wall, on the left, a glass door, also with curtains drawn back. Through the panes can be seen part of a veranda outside, and trees covered with autumn foliage. An oval table, with a cover on it, and surrounded by chairs, stands well forward. In front, by the wall on the right, a wide store of dark porcelain, a high-backed arm-chair, a cushioned foot-rest, and two footstools. A settee, with a small round table in front of it, fills the upper right-hand corner. In front, on the left, a little way from the wall, a sofa. Further back than the glass door, a piano. On either side*

<sup>9</sup> Taken from <http://www.sheridanroadmagazine.com/blog/sights-sounds-the-petrified-forest/>

<sup>10</sup> Taken from <http://www.sfgate.com/living/article/No-one-wants-to-be-put-in-a-gender-box-A-2827603.php>

<sup>11</sup> Taken from <http://www.courttheatre.org/season/show/endgame>

*of the doorway at the back a whatnot with terra-cotta and majolica ornaments.—Against the back wall of the inner room a sofa, with a table, and one or two chairs. Over the sofa hangs the portrait of a handsome elderly man in a General's uniform. Over the table a hanging lamp, with an opal glass shade.—A number of bouquets are arranged about the drawing-room, in vases and glasses. Others lie upon the tables. The floors in both rooms are covered with thick carpets.—Morning light. The sun shines in through the glass door. Miss Juliana Tesman, with her bonnet on and carrying a parasol, comes in from the hall, followed by Berta, who carries a bouquet wrapped in paper. Miss Tesman is a comely and pleasant-looking lady of about sixty-five. She is nicely but simply dressed in a grey walking-costume. Berta is a middle-aged woman of plain and rather countrified appearance.*

Taken from *The Works of Henrik Ibsen: Hedda Gabler and The Master Builder* (1912:21-22) published by Charles Scribner's Sons

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Excerpt 2:

*A country road. A tree.*

*Evening.*

Taken from *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (1954:2) published by Grove Press Inc.

- Subjects and themes in modern drama comprise many issues and reach many aspects of human life comparing to those found in previous eras. What makes this variety of subject and themes happen?

### 2.3.2. Individual Assignment

You have been introduced to some greatest modern dramatic works. Do the matters discussed in the like of *A Doll's House* or *Waiting for Godot* serve useful purposes to humanity even until today? What makes those dramas relevant/irrelevant to refer to?