

Prominent “isms” in Modern Drama

Contents

This chapter addresses characteristics of modern drama, specifically discussion about some prominent “isms”: realism, naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, and existentialism. Related tasks are composed in pre- and post-reading activities.

Objectives

Finishing this chapter you are expected to:

1. know characteristics of realism, naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, and existentialism in modern drama
2. know the product of expressionist theatre after scrutinizing the excerpt and figure taken from Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine*
3. understand the spirit of naturalism and symbolism in the excerpts of Anton Chekov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, and William Butler Yeats’ *At the Hawk’s Well*
4. know the similarities among realism, naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, and existentialism in modern drama

Meeting 4

3.1. Pre-reading Activity

The following excerpt is stage direction of the final scene in Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* (1923). Read carefully.

Before the curtain rises the clicking of an adding machine is heard. The curtain rises upon an office similar in appearance to that in scene two... In the middle of the room Zero is seated completely absorbed in the operation of an adding machine. He presses the keys and pulls the lever with mechanical precision. He still wears his full-dress suit but he has added to it sleeve protectors and a green eye shade. A strip of white paper-tape flows steadily from the machine as Zero operates. The room is filled with this tape – streamers, festoons, billows of it everywhere. It covers the floor and furniture, it climbs the walls and

chokes the doorways.

The stage aforementioned direction is performed in the following figure 3.1: Zero (the man with full-dress suit) jumps from key to key on giant adding machine. Look carefully.

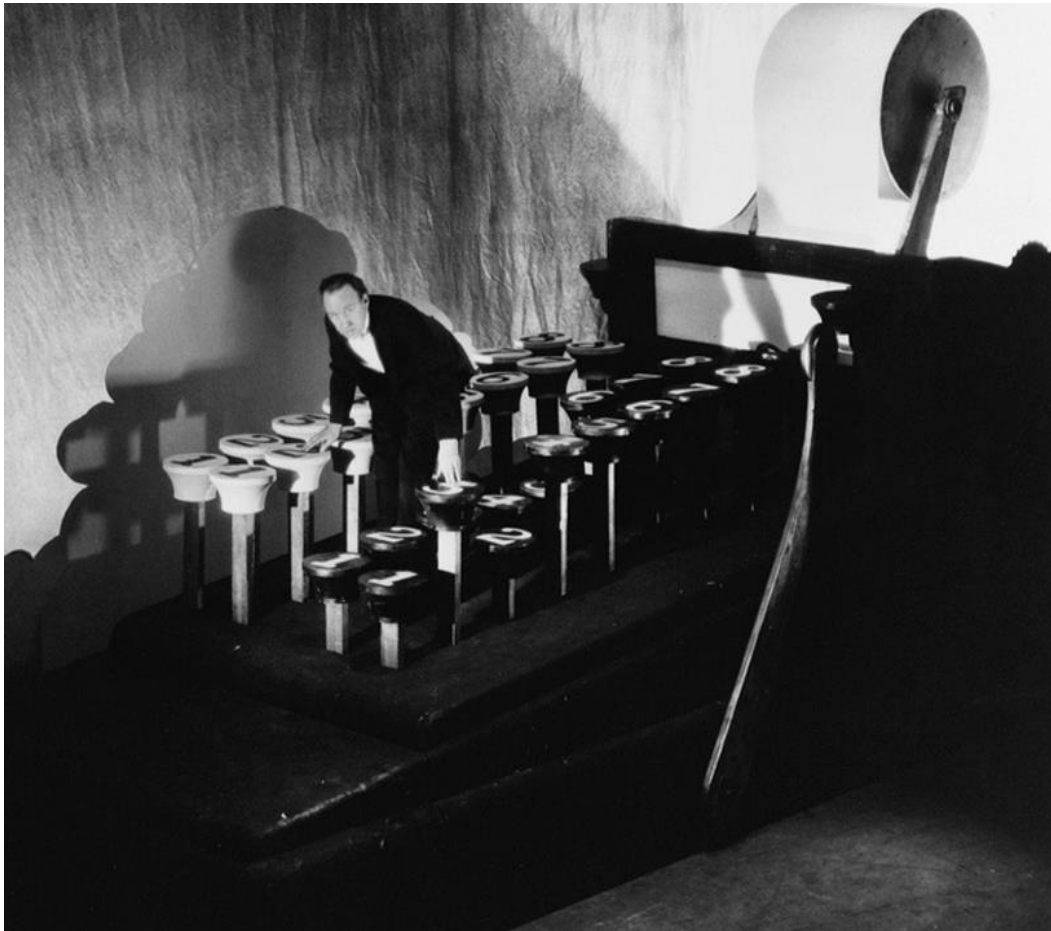


Figure 3.1

Taken from *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre* (2005:176-177) written by Julia A. Walker

Adding machine is early version of calculator; a device for adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing numbers. The adding machine in Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* is portrayed as a huge device filling the stage. It is as if the stage is the device itself and the character, Zero, does his activities on it.

1. Browse the internet to find the actual size of adding machine in early 20th century and compare it with the one you see in figure

- 3.1. Is the real one as huge as the fictitious one? Provide evidence to prove your answer.
2. In your opinion, what is the purpose of portraying a man who is working on a giant adding machine as shown in figure 3.1?

3.2. Reading Activity

Flourishing "isms"

Humanities observed rapid growth of cities and machines resulting in social and political upheaval in 19th and 20th century. Men of letters perceived this phenomenon and reacted critically by employing new approaches and theories integrated in their works. The world of drama, in particular, did not only belong to well-made plays any longer since newly-born plays offered new perspectives. These dramatic works introduced the so-called "ism"¹². Some of the isms are influential, even until today. In fact, they have been inspiring the humanities throughout the ages.

As stated in previous chapter, early modern drama is identical with realism. Many literary critics believe that realism is a product of momentous events in the late eighteenth century. Revolutions in social and political realms happened and gave the way for a new era. Egalitarian beliefs replaced the oppressive monarchy and the middle class began to be influential, empowered by rapid expansion of industry. According to Birkerts (1996:1305), realism was born because artists and writers responded to the needs of the new public, creating works that presented issues and situations familiar to the common person. In this case, the new public meant by Birkerts was the middle class. Realism in drama is marked by the portrayal of middle class people who are speaking to one another by using real to life language. They talk about daily problems. In performance, realism is supported by realistically designed stage and props.

Realism, to some extent, may overlap with naturalism. Both isms emphasize objective presentation of life. However, it is believed that realism which spawns naturalism. There is the dividing line between them. Naturalism tries to show social matters as they are, regardless of dramatic convention; as we can find in Anton Chekov's *At The Cherry Orchard*, for example, which portrays reality by providing a "slice of life". A dramatic work inspired by naturalism is not tied to well-made plot to achieve its effect. Thus, it is not surprising that a naturalist drama ends in anticlimax or lack of resolution.

In contrast with realism and naturalism, symbolism proposes the use of metaphors and images to express ideas. It is evoking rather than describing. A symbolist drama employs aesthetics values in its dialogue rather than direct statements; as we can find in William Butler Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well*, for example. The world in symbolists' point of view is different from realists' and naturalists'. According to Birkerts (1996:1439), symbolists suggest that things of this world are

¹² Movement, ideology, belief, or set of principles

just emblems of a deeper reality. As a result, symbolist dramas are often dense with otherworldly atmosphere.

Another ism rejecting realistic premises is expressionism. Instead of being objective in depicting things, expressionists expose subjective feelings. They try to present emotional experience in performance. The inner nature of reality must be elaborated and exposed with the emotions. According to Birkerts (1996:1439), expressionism is a reaction to dramatic works that put trust in surfaces. The logic, in contrast with the mirroring rule of realism, is to present life not as it is perceived outwardly, but as it is felt. The dramatic works applying expressionism provide tormented and logically disconnected storyline.

The last prominent ism influencing modern drama is existentialism. The concept of existentialism, actually, can be traced back years before 19th century. Nevertheless, it is Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, who is celebrated as the founder of modern existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on the individual human being's experience of, recognition of, and triumph over the meaningless of existence (Morner & Rausch, 1991:73). The notion of existentialism is implemented in absurdist drama that offers no clear climax, no true reversal, no understandable confrontation scene, and no definable insight (King, 2007:455). This kind of drama emphasizes the limitations of language for communication and the absence of meaning in life.

3.3. Post-reading Activity

3.3.1. Group Discussion

1. The following excerpt is taken from Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1903). Read carefully.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD

(Act IV - when Lopahin (Yermolay Alexeyevitch) is about to leave the house of Madame Ranevsky. Lopahin is talking with Varya (Varvara Mihailova) before leaving the house.)

VARYA. (Looking a long while over things). It's strange, I can't find it anywhere.

LOPAHIN. What are you looking for?

VARYA. I packed it myself and I can't remember. (A pause)

LOPAHIN. Where are you going now, Varvara Mihailova?

VARYA. I? To the Ragulins. I have arranged to go to them to look after the house – as a housekeeper.

LOPAHIN.	That's in Yashnovo? It'll be seventy miles away. (A pause). So this is the end of life in this house!
VARYA.	(Looking among things). Where is it? Perhaps I put it in the trunk. Yes, life in this house is over – there will be no more of it.
LOPAHIN.	And I'm just off to Harkov soon – by this next train. I've a lot of business there. I'm leaving Epihodov here, and I've taken him on.
VARYA.	Really!
LOPAHIN.	This time last year we had snow already, if you remember; but now it's so fine and sunny. Though it's cold, to be sure – three degrees of frost.
VARYA.	I haven't looked. (A pause). And besides, our thermometer's broken. (A pause).
VOICE AT THE DOOR FROM THE YARD.	"Yermolay Alexeyevitch!"
LOPAHIN.	(As though he had long been expecting this summons.) This minute!

Taken from *Literature: The Evolving Canon* (1996:1392-1393) written and compiled by Sven Birkerts

After reading the excerpt, answer the following questions. Take some suitable quotations to support your answers.

- a. Which one is more important for Lopahin: the answer for what Varya is looking for or the place Varya is going to go? Explain your answer.
- b. Which one is more important for Varya: the place Lopahin is going to go or the information about weather given by Lopahin? Explain your answer.
- c. What is the significance of pauses in the dialogue between Varya and Lopahin?

2. The following excerpt is taken from William Butler Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well* (1916). Read carefully.

AT THE HAWK'S WELL

(When Young Man, who is looking for a well, meets Old Man.)

OLD MAN. What mischief brings you hither, you are like those
Who are crazy for the shedding of men's blood,
And for the love of women?

YOUNG MAN. A rumour has led me,
A story told over the wine towards dawn.
I rose from table, found a boat, spread sail
And with a lucky wind under the sail
Crossed waves that have seemed charmed, and found
this shore.

OLD MAN. There is no house to sack among these hills
Nor beautiful woman to be carried off.

YOUNG MAN. You should be native here, for that rough tongue
Matches the barbarous spot. You can, it may be,
Lead me to what I seek, a well wherein
Three hazels drop their nuts and withered leaves,
And where a solitary girl keeps watch
Among grey boulders. He who drinks, they say,
Of that miraculous water lives for ever.

OLD MAN. And are there not before your eyes at the instant
Grey boulders and a solitary girl
And three stripped hazels?

YOUNG MAN. But there is no well.

OLD MAN. Can you see nothing yonder?

YOUNG MAN. I but see
A hollow among stones half-full of leaves.

OLD MAN. And do you think so great a gift is found
By no more toil than spreading out a sail,
And climbing a steep hill? Oh, folly of youth,
Why should that hollow place fill up for you,
That will not fill for me? I have lain in wait
For more than fifty years to find it empty,
Or but to find the stupid wind of the sea
Drive round the perishable leaves.

YOUNG MAN. So it seems
There is some moment when the water fills it.

OLD MAN. A secret moment that the holy shades
That dance upon the desolate mountain know,
And not a living man, and when it comes
The water has scarce plashed before it is gone.

YOUNG MAN. I will stand here and wait. Why should the luck
Of Sualtam's son desert him now? For never
Have I had long to wait for anything.

Taken from *Four Plays for Dancers*
(1920:4-5) written by William Butler
Yeats

After reading the excerpt, answer the following questions. Take some suitable quotations to support your answer.

- a. Does Old Man welcome Young Man? Provide evidence proving that Old Man welcomes/does not welcome Young Man.
 - b. Why are they arguing with each other?
 - c. Is there any water in the well when the dialogue happens? Explain your answer.
3. Many literary critics regard Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* carries out the spirit of naturalism. On the other hand, William Butler Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well* is an example of symbolist drama. Explain the naturalism that you can find in the excerpt of *The Cherry Orchard* and the symbolism in the excerpt of *At the Hawk's Well*. Take some quotations from the excerpts to support your arguments.

3.3.2. Individual Assignment

You have studied the characteristics of realism, naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, and existentialism found in modern drama. Although they vary in characteristics, they also have many aspects in common. What are the similarities among those isms?