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January 2023

36 Theatrical and Literary Terms for Study

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Recommended Citation

Nesbitt, C. (2023). 36 Theatrical and Literary Terms for Study. , (). Retrieved from https://commons.erau.edu/db-hu-315-spring2023/34

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36 Theatrical and Literary Terms for Study

1. Antagonist - The person, idea, force, or general set of circumstances opposing the protagonist.

2. Antihero - A protagonist or central character who lacks the qualities typically associated with heroism—for example, bravery, morality, or toughness, or determination—but still manages to earn sympathy from the spectator. Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's 1949 play *Death of a Salesman* is a prototypical example. (Note that the current use of this term to define a "bad guy" or criminal character goes against the traditional historical definition used here.)

3. Aside - A theatrical convention in which a character, unnoticed by the other characters on stage, speaks frankly and directly to the audience to express a thought.

4. Avant-garde - Originally a military term, the term became increasingly used to describe unusual and therefore advanced forms of art and theater.

5. Blocking - The specific movement or positioning of actors, scenery, and props onstage intended to enhance the theatrical experience for the spectator. Similar to *mise en scene* in film.

6. Catharsis - The emotional release or sense of relief a spectator may feel at the end of a tragedy.

7. Chorus - In Greek drama, a group of singers and dancers who often provide exposition and commentary on the action in a play.

8. Denouement - In a play, the point in which the loose ends of a plot are tied up, usually leaving no audience questions unanswered, as in a "Well-Made Play."

9. Deus ex Machina - In ancient Athenian drama, the entrance of a god to unravel the problems in a play (translated roughly as "the God in the machine"). Today, the term refers to the artificial, convenient, easy, and illogical solution of problems at the end of a formulaic play or other narrative.

10. Downstage - The area on stage closest to the audience.

11. Elizabethan Drama - Elizabethan drama was the dominant art form that flourished during and a little after the reign of Elizabeth I, who was Queen of England from 1558 to 1603. Before, drama consisted of simple morality plays and interludes, which were skits performed at the banquets of the Queen’s father Henry VIII or at public schools at Eton. The Elizabethan era saw the birth of plays that were far more morally complex, vital and diverse. Elizabethan theatre itself was notoriously raucous. People, most of whom stood throughout the play, talked back to the actors as if they were real people. Hints of this can be discerned even in Shakespeare’s plays. Adolescent boy actors played female roles, and the performances were held in the afternoon because there was no artificial light. There was also no scenery to speak of, and the costumes let the audience know the social status of the characters.

More and more theatres grew up around London and eventually attracted Shakespeare, who wrote some of the greatest plays in world literature. His plays continue to cast a shadow over all other plays of the era and quite possibly all other plays that came after his. The Puritan reaction against the stage was such that the players had to set up theatres outside the London city limits on the south side of the Thames, but attending plays remained popular among non-Puritans. The most famous of these theatres was the Globe Theatre, established in 1599. The Globe premiered some of Shakespeare's greatest plays, including Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear. Its design influenced the design of other theatres, even still to this day.

12. **Flat Character** - Term used to describe a character with only one outstanding trait; rarely the central character in a narrative; stays the same throughout a story.

13. **Fourth Wall** - The invisible "wall" at the front of the stage between the performers and audience. When a character speaks to or directly interacts with the audience, this is called "breaking the fourth wall."

14. **Hubris** - The tragic flaw of pride or arrogance that can lead to a hero to disregard accepted moral codes or warnings from the gods, prompting his or her own downfall.

15. **Metatheater** - A term coined in 1963 to describe the self-conscious dramatic examination of the nature of theater itself, primarily the relationship between reality and theatrical illusion. Conscious displays of theatricality and role-playing are two prominent conventions.

16. **Method Acting** - A system of acting derived from the Stanislavsky Method and developed by Polish-American actor and director Lee Strasburg beginning in the 1930s. Actors who employ "the method," as it is often called, attempt to embody the emotional life of the character by utilizing experiences from their own past to stimulate engaging, realistic performances. Frequently, method actors will stay "in character" during the entire time they are working on a play or film, even at home and in their personal lives, to further dedicate themselves to bringing the character to life.

17. **Modernism** - Movement throughout the creative arts (literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, film, etc.) from roughly the beginning of the 20th Century through the end of World War II (or around the middle of the 20th Century) that primarily marked a break from previous artistic forms, formulas, subject matter, and themes, as modernist artists reflected the massive changes happening throughout the world and heeded the call of poet Ezra Pound to "make it new." Initially, modernism had an exuberant and optimistic spirit, somewhat suggesting that, as "modern" people, we had *arrived* and all we needed to do was keep following the path of progress in industry, philosophy, psychology, and political theory and the future would be great—practically utopian. The outbreak of World War I and various atrocities, economic collapses, and the rise of fascism and totalitarianism dimmed this hopeful strain. The mid-1910s through roughly the early 1930s is generally considered "high modernism," or its peak period, and it's during this time that modernist work began to be more and more fractured, fragmented, abstract, and abstruse—think of the fragmentation of T.S. Eliot's epic poem *The Wasteland*, for instance, or the emergence of abstract art (such as Picasso), surrealism (Dali), and musical dissonance (Stravinsky), all of which can be said to be reflective of a growing disillusionment, fragmentations within various societies (such as the U.S.), and a focus on some of humanity's darkest fears and most troublesome activities (war, violence, racism, sexism, corruption, greed, crime, and unjust inequality). Many of the

Moderns also felt that art and literature should not be "easy" and should actively engage readers and audiences in intellectual inquiry; they rebelled against formulaic and simplistic works like what had come to be called "the well-made play," the kind of play where everything is clearly explained to audiences and goes to great pains to be neither difficult nor controversial. Thus, *The Wasteland* is filled with allusions, footnotes, and complicated passages, and Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images* presents a painting of a pipe with the words "This is not a pipe" written underneath it—if it's not a pipe, one is forced to ask oneself, then what is it? Ultimately, and through this shift from positivism toward pessimism and critique, modernists sought a break from established rules, traditions, conventions, and expectations of artistic works, as many artists of all kinds felt that the old forms had been played out and no longer offered very much of value to their audiences (or humanity more broadly). This often led to critical and audience backlash, such as audiences of Luigi Pirandello's 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Stravinsky's 1913 symphony *Rites of Spring*, both of which caused rioting by confused and angry paying customers yet later exerted a profound influence on future artists, writers, and composers and came to be viewed as classics and important works of art. Modern writers and artists were thus driven by and known for experimentations in form, style, and theme, and for engaging the intellects of audiences to seek meaning in the works—and in the world. In the 1940s, when hydrogen bombs were dropped on two heavily populated Japanese cities and German Nazis tortured and killed around 6 million Jews and around 11 million people total (including many Gypsies, homosexuals, disabled people, Soviets, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others), the Modernist movement more or less ground to a halt, with the hopefulness displayed by early Moderns lost to a climate of fear and pessimism—if this is what it means to be "modern," the feeling seemed to be, then perhaps it's time to be something else. That something else came to be called Postmodernism.

18. **Motif** - A recurrent element in an artistic work that is generally tied to the themes or overall idea of the piece as a whole.

19. **Naturalism** - A literary and theatrical movement that thrived in the late 19th Century. Its writers sought to depict life truthfully, objectively, and with scientific accuracy. It also placed an emphasis on people's relationship to the society and environment within which they exist, and on the concept of people being a product or their environment, suggesting a weakening of the idea of free will and a strengthening of the notion that we are social constructs.

20. **Parody** - A creative work that imitates the form of another work, usually (but not always) in a comic fashion, usually with no larger goals than poking fun at the form. Fake commercials on *Saturday Night Live*, the *Scary Movie* franchise, and Weird Al Yankovic's songs and videos are examples.

21. **Postmodernism:**

a) the styles and aesthetics of the creative arts of the western world—especially literature, painting, sculpture, music, film, and architecture, but extending well beyond those—of the era beginning roughly with the end of World War II and extending through the rest of the 20th Century and into the first decades of the 21st, which tend toward fragmentation, multiple perspectives, pastiche, satire, parody, playfulness, irony, an antipathy toward chronology and

typical expectations, a blending of "low" and "high" art, mutations and hybrids of form, a lack of closure, a defiance of clear interpretation, sampling and borrowing from other works, intense self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, contingency, reader/viewer/listener dislocation, frequent use of magic realism or fantasy elements, abstractness, and, in general, structures and creations that don't always look like one would expect them to look but that still perform the same functions, such as a novel that doesn't look like a novel or a building that doesn't look like a building;

b) the themes many of the works of art and entertainment deal with in the postmodern era, which tend toward: an incredulity toward Grand Narratives and universalism, an awareness of the work's own fictionality or artificiality or constructed-ness, multiculturalism and the idea that there are no verifiable "truths" but an endless number of possible interpretations, the lack of a "center" in the contemporary world (replaced by a lot of smaller centers), colonialism and post-colonialism, voice to the voiceless, a focus on the marginalized and oppressed, an impulse to deconstruct totalizing and monolithic systems and institutions, the unknowability of things (the myth of certainty and the matrix of uncertainty), history and the questionable voracity of historical texts, and the relation between history and fiction (often represented in a blending of fact and fiction);

c) the general modes of thought in the postmodern era, which tend toward consumerism, individualism, and multiculturalism, and is heavily informed by the mass media, previous creative works, and the understanding of the precariousness of life (the atom bomb, the Holocaust, further development of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, crime, etc.) and the precariousness and relativity of institutions (religious, political, economic, social, cultural, etc.

22. Protagonist - The main or central character in a narrative.

23. Round Character - Usually but not necessarily the protagonist, this person in literature is three-dimensional, authentic, memorable, original, and true to life.

24. Satire - An attack on human follies or vices, as measured positively against a normative religious, moral, or social standard. Usually pokes fun at or critiques (often, but not always, in a comical or humorous way) a certain individual, entity, organization, or prevalent attitude with an attempt to highlight and emphasize, through the satiric elements, something the author finds wrong or that should be changed or reconsidered. Glaspell's *Trifles* and Churchill's *Cloud Nine* are examples.

25. Satyr Play - In ancient Greece, a comedic burlesque or short satirical play that often accompanied a tragedy at festivals. Used colloquial language (rather than the elevated language of a tragedy or more serious play), lewd dialogue and gestures, graphic depictions of sexuality (including phallic props), sight gags, physical humor, scatological jokes, drunkenness, and general merriment. Were often parodies of familiar stories or farcical versions of myths. Usually included a chorus, which was often imbibing heavily. Part of the early development of satire.

26. Scenery - The physical representation of the play's setting (location and time period), which also serves to emphasize the aesthetic concept or atmosphere of the play; can be painted drops or flat, projections, a built environment, or even a natural environment.

27. **Set** - The design, decoration, and scenery of the stage during a play, usually meant to represent the location(s) in the work.

28. **Soliloquy** - A monologue uttered by a character alone onstage that provides insight into his or her thoughts.

29. **Stage Directions** - In the text of a play, directions or actions indicated by the playwright that describe the physical movements or emotional responses of the characters on the stage. May also note the setting, props, and blocking, as well as the clothing and physical appearance of the characters and their relationships with one another. In a printed play, these are usually written in italics and/or enclosed in brackets.

30. **Stanislavsky Method** - An approach to realistic acting created by Russian actor director Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) that involves the study of emotional and psychological responses and their expression through physical and vocal technique. Exerted a profound influence on 20th and 21st Century acting and script analysis, especially in the U.S.

31. **Symbol or Symbolism** - A specific word, idea, or object that may stand for ideas, values, persons, or ways of life.

32. **The Theater of the Absurd** - Dramatic works of certain European and American dramatists of the 1950s and early '60s whose plays evoked the philosophy of Existentialism, primarily established by philosopher Albert Camus in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), which posits that the human situation is essentially absurd and devoid of purpose and meaning. Action and dialogue in these plays are often absurd or pointless and evoke a pessimistic vision of humanity struggling vainly to find a purpose and control its fate. Humankind in this view is left feeling hopeless, bewildered, and anxious. According to this line of philosophical thinking, the universe supplies no inherent meaning for us; we each invent our own sense of meaning and purpose and individually choose to have faith in it.

    The ideas that inform the plays also dictate their structure. Absurdist playwrights, therefore, did away with most of the logical structures of traditional theatre. There is little dramatic action as conventionally understood; however frantically the characters perform, their busyness serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), plot is eliminated, and a timeless, circular quality emerges as two lost creatures, usually played as tramps, spend their days waiting—but without any certainty of whom they are waiting for or of whether he, or it, will ever come.

    Language in an Absurdist play is often dislocated, full of clichés, puns, repetitions, and non sequiturs. The characters in Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) sit and talk, repeating the obvious until it sounds like nonsense, thus revealing the inadequacies of verbal communication. The ridiculous, purposeless behavior and talk give the plays a sometimes dazzling comic surface, but there is an underlying serious message of metaphysical distress.

    Originally shocking in its flouting of theatrical convention while popular for its apt expression of the preoccupations of the mid-20th century, the Theatre of the Absurd declined somewhat by the mid-1960s. Many of its innovations have been absorbed into the mainstream of theatre while also serving to inspire further experiments.

33. **Theme** - The abstract concept or underlying idea that a playwright wishes to convey by uniting the dramaturgical construction of the play with specific motifs, actions, dialogue, images, etc. Usually not stated explicitly but suggested through the action and elements of a play.

34. **Upstage** - The area of the stage farthest from the audience.

35. **The "Well-Made Play"** - A play that relies on the orchestration of highly complicated plots rather than characterization or themes, usually requires very little deep contemplation from the reader or viewer, and ends by tying up all loose ends and leaving no potential audience questions unanswered. Melodramas centering on characters' relationships and emotions and murder mysteries were (and still are) examples. Popular in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries (and, to be sure, still today in many ways), but reviled and rebelled against by Modern-era playwrights.

36. **Wings** - The narrow areas off both sides of the stage, where actors wait before making an entrance in the playing space. A curtain or piece of scenery often conceals these areas.