

CHAPTER 8

The Play and Your Part



Chapter Outline

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Spotlight on Terms



- ♦ act
- ♦ antagonist
- ♦ business
- ♦ climax
- ♦ comedy
- ♦ cues
- ♦ exposition
- ♦ melodrama
- ♦ plot
- ♦ spectacle
- ♦ subtext
- ♦ theme
- ♦ tragedy

In the previous chapters, you explored activities preparing you to interpret and develop a role from a playwright's script. You used imagination, concentration, observation, sensory recall, and movement to become aware of your personal resources. You used vocal exercises to prepare your voice for creative vocal expression. Improvisation and characterization activities provided opportunities for you to explore simple character portrayal and plot development. All of these activities were preparatory techniques for acting. Now you are ready to bring a character from the written page to the stage.



The Structure of Plays

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Understand the dramatic structure of a play.
- ◆ Recognize several types of plays.
- ◆ Understand how a play is organized.

Warm Up



As a class, play a short game of charades. Use the titles of plays and musicals or the names of famous actors.

Much of an actor's time is spent working from materials written by playwrights. You have probably read plays in your language arts classes. Thus, you probably already know that a play is a story written in dialogue form to be acted out by actors before a live audience as if it were real life.

Other forms of literature, such as short stories and novels, are written in prose form and are not intended to be acted out. Poetry also differs from plays in that poetry is arranged in lines and verses and is not written to be performed.

These students are bringing literature to life in much the same way that Aristotle first described drama over 2,000 years ago.



Plays have distinguishing characteristics that make the style easy to recognize. These characteristics—the way a play is put together—make up what is often called the play’s dramatic structure.

The Elements of a Play

plot

the arrangement of the incidents that take place in a play.

exposition

detailed information revealing the facts of the plot.

climax

turning point in the action of a play.

antagonist

the character opposing the protagonist.



Are these two characters from *Batman Forever* protagonists or antagonists? Even if you didn’t see the movie, what clues help you answer the question correctly?

theme

the basic idea or purpose of the play. It ties together all the characters and events.

The dramatic structure of a play dates back to 335 B.C., when Aristotle described the six basic parts, or elements, of a play. Playwriting has changed through the years, but Aristotle’s basic components of *plot*, *character*, *thought*, *diction*, *song*, and *spectacle* still exist to some extent in all plays. Still, different plays may place more importance on one component than on another. In some plays, plot is the key ingredient. Others might feature spectacle. In still others, song might be the most important feature. Today, many teachers refer to the six basic parts of dramatic structure as *plot*, *character*, *theme*, *language*, *music*, and *spectacle*.

Plot. Aristotle tells us that the **plot** is the arrangement of the incidents that take place in a play. A plot has three basic parts: the beginning, middle, and end. The beginning introduces the audience to who, what, where, when, and why through revealing information called **exposition**. The middle is composed of a series of complications or conflicts, which result in a **climax**, or turning point. In the final part of the plot, the conflict is resolved and the story ends.

Character. The plot of the play is carried out through the action and dialogue of personalities or figures called *characters*. It is through these characters that the playwright reveals his or her message. The principal character, who represents the main thought of the play, is called the protagonist. Standing in the protagonist’s way and opposing the protagonist is a character known as the **antagonist**. All other important characters in the play will side with one of these two characters.

Thought/Theme. Playwrights have an overall meaning, or basic idea, that they wish to get across through the play. This idea, known as the thought or **theme**, ties the characters and events together and gives the play purpose. The theme of a play is usually suggested, or implied, rather than directly stated.

Diction/Language. The playwright tells the story of the play through words, or language. Careful selection of language gives the audience a better understanding of the type of play, the characters, and the plot. The lines of the play and even the stage directions are all considered the language of a play.

Song/Music. During Aristotle’s time, Greek plays were chanted or sung, often accompanied by musical instruments. In today’s theatre, song, or music, includes the sound and characteristics of the actors’ voices, as well as songs, instruments, recorded background music, and even sound effects. These musical elements are used to establish mood and enhance believability in a play.

Preparing tapes of music, background sounds, and other special sound effects is an important part of most successful productions today.



Spectacle. The last of Aristotle's six elements is spectacle. **Spectacle** includes all visual elements of production. Today, scenery, properties, lighting, costumes, makeup, stage movement, and dance are all used to create spectacle in theatre. Although scenes and plays can certainly be staged without these elements, the addition of some form of spectacle enhances most productions.

Organization of a Play

spectacle

all visual elements of production, such as scenery, properties, lighting, costumes, makeup, stage movement, and dance.

act

major division of a play.

tragedy

a play that deals with a serious situation in a serious way. The protagonist dies or is defeated at the end of the play.

The first Greek plays ran continuously from beginning to end without a break. It was Horace (65–8 B.C.), a Roman poet, who was the first writer to divide a play into five acts. An **act** is a major division of a play. Breaking up the action of a play is now a common practice. Today, most plays are divided into two or three acts, and many plays have just one act. Acts can be further divided into sections called scenes. Thus, a *scene* is a subdivision of an act. Scenes are often used to show the change of location or the passing of time. (See Figure 8–1 on the following page.)

Types of Plays

As you work with different scenes and plays, you will begin to notice the different ways that plays are classified. One play may be called a tragedy, while another may be considered a comedy. Let's look at what makes plays different.

The oldest type of dramatic literature is the tragedy. A **tragedy** deals with a serious situation in a serious way. In a tragedy, the protagonist dies or is defeated at the end of the play. Tragedies are often named after the defeated hero or heroine. *Antigone*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank* are all examples of tragedies.

A drama is also a play dealing with a serious subject in a serious way. It differs from a tragedy in that the protagonist does not die and is not

Figure 8-1

Divisions of a Play.

Major division of play → **A Raisin in the Sun**
Act 1, scene 1

Subdivision of play → By Lorraine Hansberry

Scene indicates change of location or passage of time. → Just before the scene opens BENEATHA has used profanity about an upstairs neighbor's use of a vacuum cleaner.

Plot develops through dialogue, characterization, and stage directions provided by playwright →

MAMA If you use the Lord's name just one more time—
BENEATHA (*A bit of a whine.*) Oh, Mama—
RUTH Fresh—just fresh as salt, this girl!
BENEATHA (*Dryly.*) Well—if the salt loses its savor—
MAMA Now that will do. I just ain't going to have you 'round here reciting the scriptures in vain—you hear me?
BENEATHA How did I manage to get on everybody's wrong side by just walking into a room?
RUTH If you weren't so fresh—
BENEATHA Ruth, I'm twenty years old.
MAMA What time

comedy

a play that presents its theme and characters in a humorous way. All characters come together at the end of the play.

defeated at the end. In fact, the drama often offers hope for the protagonist's situation. Some dramas that you might enjoy reading are *Little Women*, *The Chalk Garden*, *The Miracle Worker*, and *Raisin in the Sun*.

Another type of dramatic literature is the comedy. A **comedy** presents both theme and characters in a humorous way. A popular comedy plot involves two young people who are in love but who almost don't get together. After several complicated situations, the characters

The novel, *Little Women* has been successfully staged and filmed as a drama.



melodrama

an exaggerated, fast-moving play in which action is more important than characterization. The “good guys” win and the “bad guys” are punished.

finally overcome the opposition and come together at the end of the play. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Butterflies Are Free*, and *The Star Spangled Girl* are all comedies.

Often a play is a mixture of both comedy and tragedy. One of the most common mixtures is the melodrama. A **melodrama** is an exaggerated, fast-moving play in which action is more important than characterization. In the melodrama, there is a clear-cut distinction between good and evil. In the end, we see the “good guys” win and the “bad guys” punished. Melodramas that you may have read or viewed on videotape are *Dracula*, *Deathtrap*, and *Dial “M” for Murder*.

ACTION



1. Reading a Play

- Select and read a one-act play.
- Identify each of Aristotle's six elements. Describe how these elements are used in the play you have read.
- Prepare a short written report on the play you have read. Plan to discuss your work with your acting company or class.

LESSON 2

Preparing Your Part

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Learn to analyze a play.
- ◆ Develop a character from a script.
- ◆ Learn how to memorize lines.
- ◆ Perform a role portraying thought, feeling, and character.

Warm Up



Working with your acting company or in small groups, discuss your favorite actors. Compile a list of today's top five male and female actors, and give two reasons for your decision. Compare your group's list with those of the other groups. Discuss the reasons for choosing the actors.

When you participated in improvisation, you focused on creating an imaginary character in a specific situation. Now you are ready to focus on developing a character from a play. Once you are assigned a role in a scene or play, it becomes your responsibility to do everything possible to bring that character to life for the audience. Your job is to learn as much as possible about the character in order to make the character an exciting, well-developed personality. The actions of well-developed characters are much more interesting and harder to predict than those of the stock or stereotypical characters we explored in Chapter 7.

Analyzing the Play

You should begin, as professional actors do, by reading the play for enjoyment and understanding. You should then reread the entire script, looking carefully for all the information the playwright has pro-

OUR THEATRE HERITAGE

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

William Shakespeare

“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.”

You can’t study theatre without hearing the name William Shakespeare. He is considered by many to be the greatest dramatist of all time. As hinted at in the lines above from his play, *As You Like It*, his plays portray the many stages of man throughout life. Although he lived almost 400 years ago, his plays are still read and produced throughout the world today, more so than the plays of any other playwright.

Like many, you may at first be fearful of studying Shakespeare’s work. The difficult language—poetic and figurative dialogues, and allusions to the time in which he lived, will be difficult to understand. But putting some time and effort into appreciating Shakespeare’s plays can pay off. He had a keen awareness of human nature, and it is this awareness that makes his plays relevant and enjoyable today. The best way to experience Shakespeare is not just through the reading of his plays, but through the seeing of them. This is when his characters truly come to life.

Shakespeare, one of eight children, was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, a town about 75 miles northwest of London, England. His parents, John and Mary Shakespeare, were prominent citizens in Stratford, and they were able to provide their son with a good education. Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway in 1582 and the marriage produced three children.



It is thought that Shakespeare left Stratford and his family in about 1587 to go to London. He probably got his start in the theatre by becoming a hireling for an acting company, and then working his way up to actor. He was a member of a very successful theatre company, The Lord Chamberland’s Men, and became an expert in all areas of theatre. Eventually he even became a shareholder in the company and

helped finance the building of the most famous of all Elizabethan theatres, The Globe Theatre. It was in The Globe that most of his best-known plays were first produced.

Scholars have raised questions about whether or not Shakespeare really wrote all the plays attributed to him. Did he put his name on someone else’s plays, just revise someone else’s work, or is he the actual author? Most Shakespearean experts agree that he borrowed stories from many other sources, but that he reworked them until they became distinctly his own. He adapted and elaborated on stories from English and Roman history and from Italian literature to create his beautiful and original plays.

Shakespeare returned to Stratford from time to time, especially when the theatres were shut down to prevent spreading of the plague. After The Globe Theater burned to the ground in 1613, Shakespeare retired permanently to Stratford-upon-Avon. He died in Stratford in 1616 at the age of 52, having written 38 plays and 154 sonnets. His plays represent a wide range of styles and types, such as tragedy, comedy, history, and fantasy. Some of the more familiar plays are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*. To this day, actors from all over the world consider it a credit to their careers to have performed Shakespeare. ■



Doesn't this look like a perfect setting for reading and analyzing a play? If you don't have access to a theatre, a quiet room at home or in the library will work almost as well.



You need three things in the theatre: the play, the actors, and the audience; and each must give something.

Kenneth Kaigh

vided about your character. Become a detective. Make a list of every piece of information you know about the character. Various descriptions of your character might include references to physical traits, such as age, gender, height, weight, hair color, eye color, race, stance, posture, walk, and mannerisms. Also pay special attention to what other characters say and think about your character. Note any references to voice quality, accent, or dialect.

Once you have written down all of the descriptions from the script, try to create a mental picture of your character. Use your imagination to fill in any information not provided by the playwright. Refer to the character analysis questions in Chapter 7 (p. 133) for additional help.

Now ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Who are you?
- ◆ In the play, what do you need or desire?
- ◆ What obstacle stands in your way of fulfilling this need or desire?
- ◆ What is your relationship to the other characters in the play?
- ◆ Where are you in each scene of the play?
- ◆ What are you specifically doing in each scene of the play?

As you read the play again, picture your character in each scene. Concentrate on understanding the character through his or her actions and thoughts. Personalize the character by making comparisons between your character and yourself.

Researching the Play

Suppose that you were going to play the part of Black Elk in the play *Black Elk Speaks*, based on the eyewitness account of the Sioux Indians. You would no doubt want to research the history behind the play. Research is an important part of preparing for a part in any play. You might begin in your school library or media center, looking up information on the background or period of the play. If possible, you would interview someone who was living during that time or a direct descendant of someone who had lived during that period. To further your understanding of the period, you would try to find the answers to the following questions:

- ◆ What were the major world events at the time of the play?
- ◆ What were the social customs of the time?
- ◆ What type of clothing was worn?
- ◆ What music was popular?
- ◆ What famous political or social characters were popular?
- ◆ In what type of dwelling or shelter would your character have lived?
- ◆ What type of food was eaten?
- ◆ What would have been the job opportunities for your character?
- ◆ What was your character's relationship to society?

At this point in your study, you should have developed a strong impression of the character you are to portray. But before you begin rehearsing the play, discuss your ideas with the director. With the director's help and guidance, you will continue to develop the character.

A few hours of research at your school or public library will help you better understand the life and times of the characters you will play. This greater understanding will enable you to make your roles more believable and real for the audience.



It is very important that each character in a play—even the ones with very few lines or no lines at all—seem believable to the cast and to the audience. Many directors encourage cast members to create backgrounds, memories, and “life stories” for the characters they portray. These exercises help make a role more than just a name in the script.

The more real and meaningful a character becomes, the more relevant the character is to the plot of the play. When the actor playing the guard creates a background for his character, it doesn’t matter that his entire part is to stand silently at the castle gate. The entire cast accepts the role with the same understanding as they do the king’s role, even though the king has many lines. See Figure 8–2 for a character biography.

A clear understanding of all the characters in a play makes it easier for everyone in the cast to act and react with emotion. When the cast understands and believes in the characters, the audience also understands and believes. That is the essence of theatre.

Memorizing Lines

As an actor, you have many new responsibilities. One of them is memorizing your lines. Actors must memorize a script exactly as written, “word for word.” Missing a line could leave out important information or confuse another actor.

The other members of the cast depend on you, just as you depend on them, to deliver the correct line at the appropriate time. Some of the lines may be cues for the other actors. **Cues** are the lines or signals that alert another actor to be ready to speak, enter, or exit. If you don’t say your line correctly, an actor might miss his or her cue. Missed cues often cause actors to leave out lines. Missed cues also slow down a rehearsal or performance, causing the show to drag.

To memorize your lines, you need to understand them. When you first receive your script, take time to read it carefully. The lines will be

cues

the dialogue, sounds, movement, or business signaling an actor or technician to respond as rehearsed.

subtext

business

small movements and actions that do not require the actor to move from place to place.



“

Every role is a challenge. You always start from scratch.

Jessica Tandy

”

member of your family to help you with your lines. Soon you will be ready to put down the script, relying on your partner to prompt you—tell you the word or line—only when you forget. A good way to let your partner know that you need a prompt is to say “line” without breaking character.

As you go over the lines, visualize what is happening in the scene. Note your character’s movements and personal **business** (mannerisms, actions, or use of props) at that moment in the play. These mental “action” pictures help you remember the scenes as you master the script.

There are other ways to memorize. A good way to memorize when working alone is to cover your lines with an index card, removing the card after you recite the line to check for accuracy. Many actors like to memorize by acting out the lines as they move about. They associate certain movements with certain words.

Actors with many lines often divide their parts into small sections, or scenes, memorizing one scene at a time. Other actors record their cues on a tape recorder, leaving time on the tape after each cue to speak their lines. Some actors find that reading their lines aloud just before going to sleep is helpful.

Whatever method you use, memorization requires time, concentration, and drill. As an actor, it is your responsibility to spend the time needed to learn the lines of the script.

ACTION



1. **Letters of Introduction.** Write a letter in character introducing yourself to the other characters in the play you are rehearsing. Share these letters in one of the early rehearsals.
2. **Character Collage.** Create a collage of magazine or newspaper clippings. Include descriptive words and pictures that might reflect your character’s personality. Mount these on posterboard or construction paper and label with your character’s name. Create a cast “art gallery” for display during the run of the play.
3. **Memory Box.** Prepare a special “memory box” to fill with memorabilia that your character might consider important enough to save. Look through your closets or attic to see if you might have something that is similar to what you need. Secondhand stores, estate sales, or flea markets may have just the right items at low cost.
 - a. Prepare your box and share it in class or at rehearsal.
 - b. Select the one item from the box that your character would consider most precious. You might choose a locket, a lock of hair, or even a special rock. Prepare a 1-to 2-minute monologue revealing the item’s value and importance to your character. Share your monologue “in role” in class or at rehearsal.
4. **Character Bag.** Create a “character bag.” Decorate the outside of a grocery sack to reflect your character’s external traits. Use pictures and captions that reflect the outer images that the audience will be able to view immediately. Fill the inside of the sack with several items that repre-

sent the internal characteristics that will be discovered as the audience gets to know the character. Bring the bag to class or rehearsal to share with the other members of the cast.

- 5. Composing Subtext.** Write the complete subtext for your assigned part in the play.
- 6. Research Your Character.** Combine your knowledge of your character in the play with your research on the historical period in which the play takes place. Put all the information together as a “life story,” or biography, for the character you will portray (see Figure 8–2).
- 7. Analyzing a Character.** After reading the character biography in Figure 8–2, describe Monica.
 - a. What is her habit, or mannerism?
 - b. What does she enjoy doing?
 - c. What things does she dislike?
 - d. What is her greatest desire?

Figure 8–2

Character Biography.

The following part of a character biography, written by theatre student Melissa Bahs, describes Monica from the play *Twelve Dancing Princesses*, by I. E. Clark. After reading the excerpt, decide what you know about the character.

Student Example Character Biography

Monica

Monica is a very sarcastic and resentful princess. She resents being forced to sneak out of her father’s castle to attend the nightly dances at the castle of the Demon Prince. She also resents that she isn’t as beautiful as all of the other princesses. One of the things she wants most is to be as beautiful as her sisters. Being beautiful would make her feel as important as all of the other eleven sisters.

Monica is probably about sixteen years old. It would have taken her at least this much time to form such a resentful attitude toward herself and toward the other characters in the play. We know from history that young princesses were allowed to date and even marry at a very young age.

Monica’s posture is not very good because of her lack of confidence. She walks slowly and reluctantly as she journeys to the far away kingdom. She has a habit of twirling a ring on her right hand. Perhaps this ring was given to her by a prince with whom she was once in love.

Although Monica is not as beautiful as the other princesses, she is clean and neat. She has straight brown hair and greenish-blue eyes. She looks a little like I look.

She is physically healthy, but she is mentally unhealthy because of her constant depression over her situation with her sisters and her father. Her depression shows in her movements, in her reactions to other characters, and in her voice. Each time she speaks, her deep mature voice is harsh and cruel and very sarcastic.

Monica’s lines indicate that she is intelligent and that she has a good imagination. She is well read and well-versed on the current affairs of the kingdom, although she does not share these facts with her sisters.

Curtain Call!

CHAPTER 8 REVIEW

■ ■ SPOTLIGHT ON TERMS ■ ■

An important part of theatre is understanding the terminology, or vocabulary, used. Add the new terms and definitions to the vocabulary section of your theatre notebook or folder.

■ ■ FOCUS ON FACTS ■ ■

1. Explain the elements that make up the dramatic structure of a play.
2. In what ways are plays different from short stories and novels? In what ways are they similar?
3. What steps should an actor follow when developing a character from a script?
4. How does researching the play benefit the actor?
5. Explain one method of memorizing lines.
6. What is meant by subtext?
7. Describe one way a playwright might tell you about a character.

■ ■ REFLECTIONS ■ ■

Discuss the following questions with your class or answer them on paper as instructed by your teacher.

1. How did working with a script differ from improvisation?
2. What memorization technique worked best for you?
3. Which activity in this chapter did you enjoy the most? Why?
4. In what ways was this a challenging or an easy chapter?
5. Why do you think Aristotle's six elements are still basic to the dramatic structure of a play?
6. Which type of play would you prefer to read? Why?

■ ■ THEATRE IN YOUR LIFE ■ ■

Discuss aloud or explain in a short journal entry in your theatre notebook the personal challenge that this chapter presented for you.

■ ■ ENCORE ■ ■

1. Prepare and perform a monologue.
 - a. Analyze the scene, writing subtext for your character's lines.
 - b. Develop a character using the character analysis questions given in Chapter 7.
 - c. Memorize your lines and prepare the scene for performance.
 - d. Perform the scene according to your teacher's instructions.
2. Recall plays (or parts of plays) that you have studied in your language arts classes. Did you enjoy reading these plays? Why or why not?
3. Make a list of all the plays (and parts of plays) included in your literature textbook. Next to each play, write the type of play (tragedy, comedy, etc.) you think best describes that play. Be prepared to explain why you categorized the play as you did.
4. Pick a character from a play to analyze. Write out answers to the six questions toward the top of page 143. Use your imagination to answer the questions. There are no right or wrong answers.