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# Drama in the Classroom: A Ninth-Grade Curriculum Unit

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## 1. Objectives

This unit is an introductory survey of drama for ninth graders based on six plays, each representative of different historical dramatic period: The *Antigone* of Sophocles, *Everyman* , Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Wilde's The *Importance of Being Earnest* , Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* , and Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* .

I chose this topic for many reasons, one of which was the students' favorable response to drama as a genre. As a first-year teacher, I was impressed by the enthusiasm most students showed at the prospect of playing a role. An opportunity for a dynamic exchange between personalities develops. Students become increasingly involved in the problems of characters, and in the problem of separating the character's personalities from their own.

The play exists on stage, but in modern times plays have also become reading material. When students study a piece of art which is sometimes a book, sometimes a classroom event, and sometimes almost "real life," they come close to having a total literary experience. They are responding more intensely to both spoken and written language, and are becoming aware of the shadowy distinction between art and life.

Drama can create all kinds of learning opportunities. Different students respond to different types of learning exercises; drama can engage them emotionally, sensually, cognitively, and/or physically.

I want to use a variety of approaches, appealing to each of these perceptions. Exercises can be literary, emphasizing the linguistic problem of translation or the history of the English language. They can be visual, asking students to imagine settings and then to draw them or represent them with pictures from magazines. Physical, kinesthetic exercises can get students to act out roles, and to demonstrate communication skills through actions, histrionics, and body language. Recordings and rival readings can teach students to listen to language more closely.

Acting exercises and role-playing help students understand personality and motivation. The experience of exploring adult roles and attempting to realize strange situations can provide adolescents with skills for living. By improving their understanding of motivation, body language, and complex emotions, the study of drama can enhance both their intellectual and social skills.

The plays represent human experiences drawn from different times, countries, and cultures. Often they describe value systems and situations with which students are unfamiliar. Maturity has been defined by psychologists as the ability to tolerate differences in others; this trait is a product of the study of the humanities. Drama brings students closer to imagining and reproducing the feelings of people quite different from themselves, and this is a learning experience. The imagination is two-edged. It can create neuroses where none exist, but it can also teach people how to adapt to unexpected or unusual situations. You can, for example, prepare to cope with a difficult phone call or a court appearance by rehearsing it several times in your mind. Even soap operas can help with our "rehearsals"; they teach human response to tragedy and adversity. This is useful information. If my friend tells me he made his "Joan Crawford shoulders and walked out," I know he has used a learned and reliable response to a situation he found unpleasant or difficult. We all need roles. Adolescents especially are searching for a repertoire they can draw on, and while soap opera and Joan Crawford have their place, great drama has satisfied wider audiences for a longer period of time. Good literature provides insights into such larger problems of existence as the purpose of life, the fear of the unknown, the meaning of religion, and the life of the unconscious.

All right. You might agree that drama should be taught, but why mix it with history and anthropology? Well, I've read as many arguments for teaching history through drama as I've read for teaching drama as an art form independent of its source and time, but I am very interested in tradition. You must understand the development of a people to understand their conscious and unconscious beliefs. The tradition of violence in America, for instance, is not a result of spontaneous generation. No, it isn't. If you have ever wondered why Germans are militaristic and melodramatic, why the French kiss everyone, or why there are more Californians in the *Guiness Book of World Records* than any other group, you know what I'm talking about. The plays I have chosen encompass a larger tradition than any of these examples. They are part of the tradition of the Western world, the Occident.

Studying a historical flow gives me a conception of man's history, not only in terms of artifact and anthropology, but also in terms of thinking, feeling, and reasoning. It gives me a sense of the changes in location of large masses of humanity. It makes me aware that there have been hundreds of thousands of lifetimes before mine and allows me to evaluate mine in relation to this truth. Knowing this, I don't feel as isolated, and I don't feel as important. I think overconcentration on the self is very bad, and it is certainly characteristic of this highly self-conscious age group we teach. Students whose minds and bodies are changing rapidly are susceptible to morbid intro version, to mild megalomania. There's more than this. Thinking in a historical way has always given me a sense of belonging to an ancient and timeless group of thinking, living, beings striving to order their universe while coping with the petty annoyances of life on a daily basis. It is looking at the goblets of Napoleon and Josephine and realizing that they filled them with wine, laughed, talked, and spilled some on their royal robes. Kings got drunk and Elizabethans ripped their doublets. Of course they did. 1 hope to transmit some of these understandings to my students without simply creating heads full of Cartesian nonsense. I think these are worthwhile objectives.

What happened to art for art's sake? I never intended to lose sight of it. I believe that a work of art can never be considered wholly apart from certain influencing factors. There are four of these factors: the work itself, its place in history, its creator, and its audience.* These factors combine and separate in my mind. Their realization is Protean. Forms become standardized, and at times contain their own message apart from content. They mean something. This meaning changes. The changes are a result of an audience, a creator, a history. And although forms may change, the fact of their inherent ability to *mean* remains constant. Form and content are fraternal twins. I don't play favorites. This understanding becomes more than ordinarily important when dealing with iconoclasts like Ionesco. I'm interested, therefore, in observing the development of a form

over time in order to understand the origins and purposes of that form as responses to humanity's changing demands. Demands change, as Ezra Pound invites us to observe with him:

> The "age demanded" chiefly a mould in plaster,
> Made with no loss of time,
> A prose kinema, not, assuredly, alabaster
> Or the "sculpture" of rhyme.

Activities concerning the art of drama and the nature of language, plot, setting, and characterization are central to the unit. These exercises should give students an understanding of the nature of literature: it is art as expression, art as pattern, art as ornament, art as necessity. I hope students' skills in evaluating dramatic art and their skills in reading and comprehension will improve.

So there you are. I want my students to acquire skills ranging from vocabulary to the perception of form, the meaning of culture, and the meaning of maturity. What they will actually come away with is impossible for me to guess, but if everyone is left with even one lasting impression or idea, I will be happy. I'm easily pleased.

*See Meyer Abrams, *The Mirror and The Lamp* .

## 2. Introducing the Unit—Myth

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The method which comes to me as containing the least amount of madness for this complicated message is a preliminary perusal of Edith Hamilton, honorary citizen of Athens (1957). Students find the stories she tells entertaining in light of their resemblance to superhero comics, and (always curious to me) to science fiction. It is necessary to begin the study of drama with the study of myth because drama has its origins in the Greek worship of Dionysus. [1] *Antigone* will be more accessible and more acceptable to students if they have read the story of Oedipus. If I want them to learn that literature contains man's unconscious and religious instincts, his response to the unknown, I have to begin with the ideas of Greek myth. I have to demonstrate its influence on Christianity, and Christianity's influence on most of the world. It is important that they understand how much of literature is a continuation of, or a reaction to, these early ideas.

I intend to proceed with discussions, vocabulary and quizzes. The most important exercises are the two final compositions. The first of these is the writing of a modern myth.

In order to do this, students have to understand the fear and danger of the times which gave rise to such stories. They must attempt to imagine living with information which created such behavior as sacrifice and taboo. The unconscious still moves us in these directions. People are still troubled by obsessive and compulsive acts, by superstitions. The easiest way for students to make a connection between myth and mind is to discuss modern superstitions. (You will hear many unusual beliefs and many family ghost stories.) Why

do superstitions exist? What is the point of not opening an umbrella in the house? Why not “cut a tree” when you’re walking? They must attempt to place themselves in the position of living without science. Ask them to picture the sunrise, the death of vegetation and its rebirth, the death of men (and the possibility of their rebirth). Knowing nothing of science, how are they to explain it all? Myths were the fundamental explanations of questions like:.

> Why does the sun set?
>
> Why is there rain, lightning, thunder?
>
> Why do plants die and come back to life?
>
> Where did that tree, plant, animal, or flower come from?
>
> What is madness, disease?
>
> Why don’t we eat that?

Students would write a fictitious modern explanation of their own to some such question.

The final essay of the introductory unit will involve the questioning of one of the following religious parallels. I plan to point these out as the class reads the material. I am hoping that the Institute will provide a set of King James Bibles, as it will be necessary to read both versions of a story at once. I’m sure students will wonder, as I do, about the real meaning of ideas which are so often repeated. Some manifestations of these ideas are:

1. The festivals of Ceres and Dionysus and the rites of Christmas and Easter.
2. The theme of cannibalism in the stories of Tantalus, Procne, and Atreus, and the rite of communion.
3. The theme of sacrificing children in the stories of Iphigenia, Hector, Menoeceus, Odin and Ymir, and in the Biblical tales of Isaac and Abraham and of Christ.
4. The theme of destruction by flood in the stories of Baucus and Philemon, Deucalion and Pyrrha, and of Noah, and in the scientific theory that man returned to the sea for several thousand years.
5. The Greek and Norse explanations of creation, the account in Genesis, and scientific theories.
6. The personality of Zeus and the suffering of Prometheus compared with the personality of God and the suffering of Job.
7. The fall of Hephaestus from Olympus and the fall of Lucifer from heaven.
8. Danae and Perseus and the Annunciation.

What has all of this accomplished? It has asked questions about the nature of religion and superstition. It has formed a bridge between mythology and Christianity to which drama owes so much. It can pose the question of the necessity of religion: Is it necessary, and if so, why so? I think so.

More important, it has familiarized students with the story *Antigone* is based on. It can help their reading of *Everyman* by providing a basic Christian background. Historically speaking, it can help students realize that the church struggled to build a congregation by adopting pagan rituals, by outlawing drama, and then by reintroducing pageantry in the Mass and in the mystery and miracle plays. Once the Church built an audience, it had to keep it by continuing to appeal to it. This history suggests a continuing human need for drama.

Mythology and the King James Bible can make the language and allusions of Shakespeare easier to deal with. It can help students understand Ibsen's Biblical references. Hamilton's continuous caustic and terse commentary is a useful tool. Her opinions familiarize students with the major Greek and Roman writers and give them a sense of their styles and personalities. This background, in addition to pictures of the authors, the theaters, the costumes, Greek life, Greek travel posters, and any other cheap and and easy tricks to spark interest have created a natural bridge to the study of Sophocles. We are ready to go on.

## 3. Teaching a Play

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But before I do go on to discuss each play individually and in relation to the rest, I would like to present a format for the teaching of plays which I plan to follow in each presentation in order to establish a tragic rhythm of teaching drama. First of all, I intend to follow some useful traditional approaches which I believe are necessary for the presentation of such plays to inner-city thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds.

I check students' understanding of material by questioning them on five levels of comprehension suggested to me by my department chairman. The first of these is the LITERAL: What are the names of the characters? What happened in the story, what is the plot? Quizzes like these convince me that students have read the material and understand the story-line. I often explain and test for vocabulary at the same time. Students are comfortable with this approach; characters' names and explication of events are familiar entities, like spoons. There's more to fine dining than that. What about the wine decanters? Students must be familiarized with technical language. The jargon of literature is as basic to its study as the jargon of chemistry is to an understanding of that subject. It is time for them, as first year high school students, to attempt a higher, more sophisticated level of evaluation, awareness, and appreciation. Although they may show an initial hostility to the unfamiliar, perseverance can be rewarding.

They should learn to look at the work from the viewpoint of the writer. They should understand how a work is put together and what skills are used to control the emotions of the reader. I attempted to convey this point of view last year by looking at propaganda and advertising and trying to extend this awareness of tactics to art. Is art propaganda? Maybe.

With this idea in mind, I ask students to learn terms like metaphor, simile, point-of-view, suspense, climax, conflict. I show them Freitag's Triangle. I tell them that poetic meter controls heartbeat. My hyperbole is justified by any lasting impression it creates. What skills are hibernating in these snowbanks? Some of the most important.

Students need this awareness of the tools authors use to manipulate the minds of their audience. They can then appreciate the craft, the skill, the process, the form. In short, they can know that while they can admire anything they read, they don't have to believe it. They can question it, even if it is a math textbook. It is for this reason I'm fond of telling them that history is gossip.

Beyond the literal I attempt to teach the technique and the purpose of the work. By purpose I mean what the author intended in terms of theme, audience response to characters, and structure of the work. This is, certainly, speculation on their part and on mine. Taking an additional step back from the text itself, I ask them to COMPARE it with other works. Lastly, I pose some questions on their RESPONSE to the work, being most pleased when they understand why they respond as they do. This requires objectivity and distance. These are skills. Composition exercises on comparison, response, dramatic history, and myth need much instructor input, library classes to search out information, in-class writing and supervision, and continuous explanation of theme.

Reading each play several times will allow the instructor to stress different aspects of drama which may be graded according to the difficulty of the concepts and the exercises which accompany them. These aspects may be defined as follows:

Setting—including plot and staging.
Language—including vocabulary, history and etymology,
translation and dialect.
Technique—including conflict, character, form and structure.
Theme—including author's purpose and audience.

Ideally, the class should do three readings of each play, although the instructor will know when a play has exhausted its classroom lifespan and when a play can survive yet another inspection. Each reading will appeal to a more difficult aspect of drama, will require more complex skills and awareness, and will be tested by questions of higher difficulty. We construct a pyramid.

The first reading is one without depth. Students become acquainted with the form of a script: the meaning of divisions like acts and scenes, the numbering of lines, the setting and the stage directions. They become familiar with the events of the plot, the names of the characters and their relationships. Knowledge of these facts is tested by a quiz on the literal level. Most importantly, during this first reading, students are asked to VISUALIZE the play. This reading concentrates on setting, historical milieu, construction of the various theaters, and the staging of productions. This is the time to inspire artistic renderings and model-building. One possible motivation is a class discussion or a writing assignment on how to build a model of a Greek, Roman, Elizabethan or modern stage.

On the second reading, you can ask questions about language and technique. These can be as simple as vocabulary which applies to every play. There are more specific language exercises which can be taught. I have included some examples of these below. The problem of translation is easily demonstrated when reading

*Antigone* . I selected passages from three translations to submit to students. The variations are obvious. The translations mean different things. The students realize that each time they read any work in translation they are removed from the author yet another time by the addition of another mind. This can be reinforced when reading Ibsen and Ionesco. When we read *Everyman* and *Romeo and Juliet* , words like: “hie,” “appaireth,” “wete,” “ado,” “weenest,” and “God gi’godden,” are undeniable proof that language is always changing. I like to recite some of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* when I teach the history of the English language. I am generally accused of having toys in the attic.

Exercises that deal with the text itself question the credibility of the dialogue in relation to character. Students are asked to make changes. Can speeches be improved by adding lines? Why? Are certain lines unnecessary, can they be left out? Why? Rewriting *Everyman* or *Romeo and Juliet* in modern slang forces students to pay close attention to language, conceits and figures of speech. It is such an old trick that I’m surprised it always pleases them.

The benefits and limitations of genres can be demonstrated by asking students to rewrite *Everyman* as a short story. Immediately, the question of point of view arises. Some students should write their story from Everyman’s point of view, some from the point of view of Death, God, or Good Deeds. Here is an opportunity to point out the need for exposition and description in narrative writing; the theater can be considered superior in this respect. On the other hand, characters can now have thoughts. Soliloquies, it should be pointed out, are peculiar to drama for a reason. What kind of a poem would *The Importance of Being Earnest* make? A limerick occurs to me BECAUSE of the meaning the form itself carries, and BECAUSE the sound of anapestic meter, even without words, is humorous.

> There was a young dandy named Jack,
> Whose morals were horribly slack.
> Oh, why should we worry,
> When we can bunbury,
> And end up with nothing we lack?

I just made that up. Well, the point is, why didn’t Wilde write a poem? Would it have said everything he wanted to say? E.B. White says that a piece of writing consists of what you have to say and how you say it. Conscious choices of form and content.

The structure of each play can be charted on the board. What is the climax, and how does the sequence of events serve to maintain suspense, interest, and effect? The arrangement of scenes is especially apparent in *The Importance of Being Earnest* which contains a microcosm of a detective story, and has a need for careful plotting in order to maintain confusion. Art is no accident.

I want to ask students to select favorite passages they would like to use in every-day conversation. This will cause them to make value judgements and perhaps add to their mental repertoire of learned responses. They can notice the different speech patterns and dialects of different characters. They can collect examples of the

speech patterns of people they know. A recording at this time would be fine.

On the third reading, choose students to represent the characters. The class can read the parts standing, which will make it necessary to discuss the problems of blocking, entrances, exits, props, and historical period. The instructor can place six students on each side of the room to represent a chorus or place them on stage to decide what movements accompany each speech. Such actions as the switching of the foils while Laertes and Hamlet duel present good interpretive and directional problems. Does Antigone stand straight and still when she recites her final speech, or does she gesticulate with defiance? What does it mean when the servants of the Capulets and Montagues "bite their thumbs?" Do Mr. and Mrs. Martin stare at each other timidly when they are trying to discover that they are not really who they think that they are, or do they behave like robots?

After students have tried their parts, the class can select the single scene they feel is most important to the play. The act of choosing this scene should incite some discussion of climax, conflict, structure and characterization. Why is this scene the most important scene, and does anyone disagree? Using whatever scene is finally selected, assign three or more students to read each role and assign three as directors (or any number, so long as everyone is occupied). Students should rehearse their readings at home. The next class is devoted to rival readings which you can record. If students seem self-conscious, some acting exercises involving the whole class could precede the readings. [2] The students explain WHY they read their parts as they do. This should lead to a discussion of motivation. The directors choose the best readers, and each directs the blocking and the reading of the scene. A vote is taken for Oscar winners. The final assignment is a theme on theme:. What are the messages of the play? Find lines in the text to support your answer.

## 4. The Unit as a Whole

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The unit begins after the introduction to mythology. I have already described a general process to be followed in presenting each play. I would like now to describe unifying ideas, general concepts and skills that particular plays can illustrate.

It's necessary to impress upon students the fact that the Greeks attained heights nearly unsurpassed in Western culture. They have given us political theory, art, philosophy, mathematics, and theater. The festivals of Dionysius were held three times each year and major dramatists competed for prizes. The City or Great Dionysia was held in the month of Elaphebolion (March to April); the Lenaea in the month of Ganelion (January to February); and the Rural Dionysia fell in Poseidon (December to January). [3] It is interesting to observe the similarity between these dates and the major festivals of Christianity, Christmas and Easter. The actors at these presentations wore heavy, brightly colored robes and *cothurni* —shoes which had soles nearly a foot high. Their masks had voice-boxes built into them; they extended several inches above the players' heads. No women acted in these plays. In more comic plays the chorus dressed as satyrs or goat-men. Each competitor submitted a tetralogy which included one satyr play. The Greek word for tent, scene, is the origin of our word *scene.* The scene was a tent behind the actor which later became a permanent structure. Actors used it for changing clothes. The door in the middle was thrown open to show tableaux of violence which had occurred backstage. Sophocles is credited with the introduction of the painted scenery which was suspended from this structure.

The class should be aware that drama began as religious worship. It's also worth commenting on how much of this literature is lost to us. They should know that one stipulation of the contests was that the playwrights had

to draw upon myth, although eventually even the Greeks became secular. (This is seen in Aristophanes' satires of prominent figures like Socrates.) In most cases, the audience was already familiar with plot. * Their interest lay in the method of presentation, in the form. *Antigone* is as structured as the Parthenon. Such was the Hellenistic admiration for ". . . order, balance, symmetry, clarity and control." *Antigone* addresses itself to religious and political questions. It is a play about conflicting ethics. You can make the class aware of such a conflict with a blackboard headline like:

> PRESIDENT SAYS FAMILY MEMBERS WILL
>
> NOT BE BURIED:
>
> Bodies to be brought to City Dump

It sounds like World War II or Soylent Green. Wrapped around this central conflict is a very elegant and rhythmic structure, Creon is

*Today, most people have read a play before seeing it.

confronted on four separate occasions, Antigone on two. Creon,s confrontations increase in intensity: each time he speaks with a character of greater significance. Students should look closely at each confrontation. Try to have them discover the repeated action.: he is opposed, he loses control, he remains stubborn and unchanged, his stubbornness triggers serious consequences. Haemon, Antigone and Eurydice commit suicide. Suicide is endemic to tragedy. Aristotle says, of course, that the plot is the imitation of the action. Fergusson maintains that this one basic action is imitated repeatedly, rhythmically, and is reflected even in the language itself. The process is based on the form of ritual. "In general, the ritual had its agon, or sacred combat between the old King, or god or hero, and the new, corresponding to the agons in the tragedies, and the clear "purpose" moment of the tragic rhythm. It had its *Sparagmos,* in which the royal victim was literally or symbolically torn asunder, followed by the lamentation and/or rejoicing of the chorus: elements which correspond to the moments of "passion." [5] How much of art is a tearing asunder of old kings? A lot. There is, in addition, something very sexual about this violent ritual. Art is an engaging and a releasing. Its terminology is "climax," "catharsis," "purgation," "rising action," "falling action."

Life is an imitation of this action. Why imitate anything except to capture it by magic? Isn't this the reason for the fear primitive peoples have of their own photographs? The point is that life is a rhythm, it is a heartbeat; and art imitates it.

All violence took place offstage in Greek drama. This changed dramatically in Roman times. The Romans adopted Greek culture and religion and later embraced Christianity. The drama declined; comedy was preferred when time was devoted to theater. Other spectacles appealed to this audience, like gladiatorial combat, and contests of Christians versus lions. "In the huge Colosseum and Circus Maximus wild beasts mangled their victims, to the joy of the crowd. Now there were even *naumachia* , 2,000 feet long, which could be flooded to float ships that engaged in naval battle in which hundreds of men met their deaths." [6] How similar to the bear-baiting and love of violence in Elizabethan times!

Rome was a strange mixture of barbarity and decadence, civilization and codified law. Decadence existed simultaneously with the new religion of Christ. What makes a people bellicose? What makes the Romans so different from the Greeks? Perhaps sailors are different from soldiers. These questions are better left to

anthropologists. A dramatic silence of six hundred years followed Rome.

The Church understandably outlawed such spectacles, only to resurrect them eventually in the pagentry of ritual. They were appealing to masses of illiterates. Drama continued to be associated with religion, but there was a secular variety no longer acceptable to organized religion. Mimes and jugglers wandered and performed, keeping comedy alive. The church added histrionics to the Mass, and gradually moved drama closer to the marketplace in the form of miracle and mystery plays which were performed on pageant wagons capable of moving from place to place. These plays gradually became more exaggerated in terms of plot and character development, and encompassed more of secular living. *Everyman* is a morality play.

Everyman is a useful teaching tool. It demonstrates the form of allegory to students. It introduces the concept of LEVELS within a play—on a literal level, every action *does* something; on other levels, every action *means* something. This difficulty in noticing anything more than the literal may be peculiar to urban students, but I have found it to be a problem. I often draw concentric circles, staircases and pyramids to indicate rings or levels of interpretation to my students. I see this as the principal value of this play. The characters are real people, yet on another level they are abstract ideas. Students can speculate on what the names of characters in other plays indicate:. Earnest, Worthing, Canon Chasuble, Lady Bracknell, Miss Prism, the Smiths. What is, after all, in a name?

The Renaissance takes its name from the reawakening of interest in the classics. By Shakespeare's time the printing press was in operation, the church had been questioned, the New World was opening up. It was another age of transition, like the Roman period, like our own. Elizabethans liked spectacle and bawdy humor. The sound of language was fundamental to their world. All information was received by word of mouth. It was once again possible to earn a living as a playwright. *Romeo and Juliet* appealed to a different kind of audience than either *Antigone* or *Everyman* . It is certainly more secular; the Church is even laughable in the form of Friar Lawrence. This age had felt the effects of the conventions of courtly love—the idolatry of womankind by such groups as the Cult of the Daisy. Was it possible that love was a religion?

It is interesting that in both *Antigone* and *Romeo and Juliet,* young lovers die at the hands of society. The ideals have changed. The ideas of religion, politics and duty are very different in the plays. The effect the two sets of double suicides have on the observer is very different; this is not only because of theme and ideals, but also because of character development. The theme of young lovers perishing persists. Is there another level of meaning? Could the lovers represent Youth itself?

One of the valuable lessons a unit like this one is the observation that themes are so often recurrent. Consider the theme of confused identity and the mystery of parentage. Antigone's father is the notorious Oedipus, whose name now labels a psychological phenomenon; her mother is also her father's mother! In Wilde's play the theme is satirized: Jack's parent is a leather bag. The fact that Hedvig is not, after all, his own child causes Hialmar to precipitate her suicide. Once again, the idea of the birth mystery is satirized by lonesco in the infamous exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Martin who discover they are the parents of Alice only to be undermined by Mary, the maid:.

> And here is the proof: the child that Donald spoke of is not Elizabeth's daughter, they are not the same person. Donald's daughter has one white eye and one red eye like Elizabeth's daughter. Whereas Donald's child has a white right eye and a red left eye, Elizabeth's child has a red right eye and a white left eye! . . . Donand and Elizabeth, not being the parents of the sane child, are not Donald and Elizabeth. [7]

Wilde's play is reminiscent of Moliere or Oliver Goldsmith because it is farcical, full of confusion and

inconsistencies which give rise to humor. This inconsistency in language and logic reappears in Ionesco where it is satirized. Wilde manipulates language; he exposes hypocrisy and pretense. He is interested in what he terms: "the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain for proof of any kind." [8] His lifestyle and beliefs ran counter to Victorian England's:

> What is termed sin is an essential element of progress. Without it, the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colorless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. [9]

I've heard of death, food, geography and vanity as motivations for history, but Sin? I have written in the margin of my book: "Perhaps all of literature is the study of human sin and human failure, both normal and abnormal—especially abnormal." I would be interested in reading student responses to his theory.

Just as MoliEre was the contemporary of Racine and Corneille, Wilde was the contemporary of Ibsen. This was an age which saw the publication of *The Origin of Species* , the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and the pressure of the conformist Victorian Age. Wilde reacted by wearing knee-breeches and a sunflower in his lapel. He satirized womanhood, paternity, marriage arrangements and the church. Ibsen looked at individuals. He resurrected tragedy—real tragedy, not melodrama. He saw the hypocrisy of the bourgeois who are always single-mindedly fearful of losing anything they have so recently gained. Shaw said, after the Great War, ". . . war, pestilence and famine have wrecked civilization and killed a number of people of whom the first batch is calculated at not less than thirteen millions. Had the gospel of ibsen been understood and heeded, these fifteen millions might have been alive now." [10] We know that art is a reflection and illumination of its time, and that it has prophetic properties as well.

Ibsen is singular in drama. His theater was an exposition of social problems, not simply an entertainment. *The Wild Duck* details the failure of ideals as well as their necessity. Rellig, the realist, is a perpetrator of lies because he knows they are necessary. Werle, the idealist, preaches the truth and shatters illusions for the sake of an ideal. He is "thirteenth at the tab1e." Does this mean he is Christ or Judas?

Ibsen sets up some important pairings. There are two married couples: Mrs. Sorby and Werle, who have no secrets, and the Ekdals, whose life together is based on a lie. There is Rellig, the realist, the antithesis of Gregers, the idealist. There is a contrast between Rellig's two patients: Molvick and Hialmar. Hedvig and Gregers are Werle's two children. Ekdal and Werle are the two fathers. Mrs. Sorby and Gina are the two wives. This duality is present in *Romeo and Juliet* , in *The Importance of Being Earnest* , and in *The Bald Soprano* . I've been impressed with duality in theater. I think it is somehow connected with the imitation of action.

The people in *The Wild Duck* seem to lead their lives independently of one another. Rellig is the only character who can notice their patterns of living and who shows any understanding of their actions. After two world wars he disappears. Art undergoes a transformation. There are abstract paintings, mobiles, atonality, dissonance, and anti-theater. There is the competition of the photograph and the film.

What are the students to make of Ionesco? The world is absurd, communication is impossible, there is no such thing as logic, there can be no projecting of any information into the future. We can base no knowledge on past events. It might be useful to tell students that when Ionesco decided to write *The Bald Soprano* , he was learning to speak English.

> In spite of his dislike of the theater, Ionesco wrote a play, almost against his will. This is how it happened. In 1948, he decided that he ought to learn English, and so he acquired an English course. Learned research, published in

> the august pages of the *Cahiers du College de Pataphysique,* has since, by close textual analysis, established that the text in question was *L'Anglais sans Peine* , of the *Assimil* method. Ionesco himself described what happened next:
>
> I set to work. Conscientiously I copied whole sentences from my primer with the purpose of memorizing them. Rereading them attentively, I learned not English but some astonishing truths—that, for example, there are seven days in the week, something I already knew; that the floor is down, the ceiling up, things I already knew as well, perhaps, but that I had never seriously thought about or had forgotten, and that seemed to me, suddenly, as stupefying as they were indisputably true. [11]

He believed that he had written a very serious piece, he had dramatized "the tragedy of language." [12] Students should recognize everyday conversation being mimicked, Perhaps they can tell you why the play is an attack on conformity, on moving through life as a robot without experiencing it. How has the audience changed?

Well, I'm finished. I have no reputation to protect, and so I've tried to be provocative. But I will say again that I think an understanding of the history of a form, and of history itself, is necessary in order to understand people and art. Shaw said, "The shallowness of the ideals of men ignorant of history is their destruction." [13] In light of recent terrorist and political movements, I have to believe him. More than this, I believe Mme. de Stael, whose words I have mounted in a little gilt frame:

> Tout comprendre
>
> ce serait
>
> Tout pardonner

**Sample Exercise One: Translation**

(Exit.)

Chorus. Of happiness the crown

and chiefest part

Is wisdom, and to hold

The gods in awe.

This is the law

That, seeing the stricken heart

Of pride brought down,

We learn when we are old. [1]

Chorus.

Who wants happiness? The main

Requirement is to be sensible.

This means not rebelling against

God’s law, for that is arrogance.

The greater your arrogance, the heavier God’s revenge

And proud men in old age learn to be wise. [2]

(Creon and his attendants enter the house.)

Chorus.

What will be is in other hands than ours.

Our happiness depends

on wisdom all the way.

The gods must have their due.

Great words by men of pride

bring greater blows upon them.

So wisdom comes to the old. [3]

Statute of Greek Tragic Actor

*(figure available in print form)*

Sophocles [4]

*(figure available in print form)*

**Settings**

***Long days journey into night —O’Neill***

***Act One***

***Scene: Living room of James Tyrone’s summer home on a morning in August, 1912.***

At rear are two double doorways with portieres. The one at right leads into a front parlor with the formally arranged, set appearance of a room rarely occupied. The other opens on a dark, windowless back parlor, never used except as a passage from living room to dining room. Against the wall between the doorways is a small bookcase, with a picture of Shakespeare above it, containing novels by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, philosophical and sociological works by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Kropotkein, Max Stirner, plays by Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, poetry by Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, etc.

In the right wall, rear, is a screen door leading out on the porch which extends halfway around the house.

Farther forward, a series of three windows looks over the front lawn to the harbor and the avenue that runs along the water front. A small wicker table and an ordinary oak desk are against the wall, flanking the windows.

In the left wall, a similar series of windows looks out on the grounds in back of the house. Beneath them is a wicker couch with cushions, its head toward rear. Farther back is a large, glassed-in bookcase with sets of Dumas, Victor Hugo, Charles Lever, three sets of Shakespeare, The World's Best Literature in fifty large volumes, Hume's History of England, Theirs' History of the ,onsulate and Empire, Smollett's History of England, Gibbon's Roman Empire and miscellaneous volumes of old plays, poetry, and several histories of Ireland. The astonishing thing about these sets is that all the volumes have the look of having been read and reread.

The hardwood floor is nearly covered by a rug, inoffensive in design and color. At center is a round table with a green shaded reading lamp, the cord plugged in one of the four sockets in the chandelier above. Around the table within reading-light range are four chairs, three of them wicker armchairs, the fourth (at right front of table) a varnished oak rocker with leather bottom.

It is around 8.30. Sunshine comes through the windows at right.

As the curtain rises, the family have just finished breakfast. Mary Tyrone and her husband enter together from the back parlor, coming from the dining room.

Mary is fifty-four, about medium height. she still has a young, graceful figure, a trifle plump, but showing little evidence of middle-aged waist and hips, although she is not tightly corseted. Her face is distinctly Irish in type. It must once have been extremely pretty, and is still striking. It does not match her healthy figure but is thin and pale with the bone structure prominent. Her nose is long and straight, her mouth wide with full, sensitive lips. She uses no rouge or any sort of make-up. Her high forehead is framed by thick, pure white hair. Accentuated by her pallor and white hair, her dark brown eyes appear black. They are usually large and beautiful, with black brows and long curling lashes.

What strikes one immediately is her extreme nervousness. Her hands are never still. They were once beautiful hands, with long, tapering fingers, but rheumatism has knotted the joints and warped the fingers, so that now they have an ugly crippled look. One avoids looking at them, the more so because one is conscious she is sensitive about their appearance and humiliated by her inability to control the nervousness which draws attention to them. [5]

***Waiting for Godo t—Becket***
A country road. A tree.

Evening. [6]

***Mother Courage—Brecht***
Spring, 1624. In Dalarna, the Swedish Commander Oxenstierna is recruiting for the campaign in Poland. The canteen woman Anna Fierling, commonly known as Mother Courage, loses a son.

Highway outside a town. A sergeant and a recruiting officer stand shivering. [7]

***Endgame —Beckett***

Bare interior.

Grey light.

Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture. Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins. Center, in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet, Hamm. Motionless by the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm, Clov. Very red face. Brief tableau.

Clov goes and stands under window left. Still, staggering walk. He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He goes and stands under window right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left. He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes six steps (for example) towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes three steps towards window left, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, looks out of window. Brief laugh. He gets down, takes one step towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, looks out of window. Brief laugh. He gets down, goes with ladder towards ashbins, halts, turns, carries back ladder and sets it down under window right, goes to ashbins, removes sheet covering them, folds it over his arm. He raises one lid, stoops and looks into bin. Brief laugh. He closes lid. Same with other bin. He goes to Hamm. removes sheet covering him, folds it over his arm. In a dressing-gown, a stiff toque on his head, *a large blood-stained handkerchief over his face* , a whistle hanging from his neck, a rug over his knees, thick socks on his feet, Hamn seems to be asleep. Clov looks him over. Brief laugh. He goes to door, halts, turns towards auditorium. [8]

***The Cherry Orchard —Chekhov***

***Scenes***
The action takes place on the estate of Madame Ranevsky, about the turn of the century.

***Act One***
A room, which has always been called the nursery. One of the doors leads into Anya’s room. Dawn, sun rises during the scene. May, the cherry trees in flower, but it is cold in the garden with the frost of early morning. Windows closed. Enter Dunyasha with a candle and Lopahin with a book in his hand. [9]

***The Balcony —GenFt***

***Scene One***
On the ceiling, a chandelier, which will remain the same in each scene. The set seems to represent a *sacristy* , formed by three *blood* -red, cloth folding-screens. The one at the rear has a built-in door. Above, a huge Spanish crucifix, drawn in *trompe I’oeil* . On the right wall, a mirror, with a carved gilt frame, reflects an unmade bed which, if the room were arranged logically, would be in the first rows of the orchestra. A table with a large jug. A yellow armchair. On the chair, a pair of black trousers, a shirt and a jacket. The Bishop, in mitre and gilded cope, is sitting in the chair. He is obviously larger than life. The role is played by an actor wearing tragedian’s cothurni about twenty inches high. His shoulders, on which the cope lies, are inordinately broadened so that when the curtain rises he looks huge and stiff, like a scarecrow. He wears garish make-up. At the side, a woman, rather young, highly made up and wearing a lace dressing-gown, is drying her hands with a towel. Standing by is another woman, Irma. She is about forty, dark, severe-looking, and is wearing a

black tailored suit and a hat with a tight string (like a chin-strap). [10]

***The Master-Builder —Ibsen***

***Act One***

A plainly furnished work-room in Solness's house. Folding doors in the wall to the left lead out to the hall. On the right is a door to the inner rooms of the house. In the back wall is an open door to the drawing-office. Downstage to the left a desk with books, papers, and writing materials. Upstage from the door is a stove. In the right-hand corner is a sofa with a table and a few chairs. On the table a jug of water and a glass. A smaller table with a rocking-chair and an arm-chair is in the foreground to the right. There are shaded lamps burning on the table in the drawing office, on the table in the corner, and on the desk.

Inside, in the drawing-office, sit Knut Brovik and his son Ragnar busy with plans and calculations. At the desk in the workroom Kaja Fosli stands writing in the ledger. Knut Brovik is a shrunken old man with white hair and beard. He is dressed in a somewhat worn but well-cared-for black coat. He wears glasses and a white stock which has grown slightly yellow. Ragnar Brovik is in his thirties, well-dressed, fair-haired, with a slight stoop. Kaja Fosli is a slenderly built girl a little over twenty, neatly dressed, but with a delicate look. She has a green shade over her eyes. All three work for a time in silence. [11]

## Notes to Translations and Settings

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1. Marcus Konick, trans., *Six Complete World Plays* (New York: Globe Book Co. Inc., 1963), pp. 48-49.
2. Robert W. Corrigan, trans., *Sophocles* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1971), p. 65.
3. David Grene, trans., Richard Lattimore, ed., *Sophocles I* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), pp. 208-9.
4. Alice B. Fort and Herbert S. Kates, *Minute History Of The Drama* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap. 1935), pp. 15, 16.
5. Eugene O'Beukk, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, . 1955. ) pp. . 11-12. .
6. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for godot* (New York: Grove Press Inc. 1954), p. 6.
7. Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage* , Eric Bentley, trans. (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1966), p. 23.
8. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1958), I.
9. Marcus Konick, *Six Complete World Plays* (New York: Globe Book Co. 1963), p. 403.
10. Jean GenFt, *The Balcony* , Bernard Frechtman, trans. (New York: Grove Press Inc. 1960), p. 7.
11. Henrik Ibsen, *The Master Builder And Other Plays* . Una Ellis-Fermor, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 123.

**Questions on Translation:**

1. What does each translation say about pride?
   What does each translation say about happiness?
2. What do you think Sophocles intended the old men should say?
3. Which translation SOUNDS the nicest? Why?
4. Which translation means the most to you? Why?
5. What is the problem with reading works in translation?
6. What should you remember when reading a translation?

Questions On Setting:

1. Which settings make it easiest for you to know what the play will be about?
2. In which plays do you think the setting is most important?
3. a) Look at the scenes which describe furniture. Tell what you think is the significance of each piece.

   b) Explain what furniture tells about the people who own it. Write a setting using your own living room. Tell how the surroundings reflect the personalities of your family and yourself.

   c) Are there any pieces of furniture mentioned in the stage settings that are not needed? Tell why.

   d) Do you think each playwright has a reason for each item he places on the stage? Why does each prop mean so much?
4. Look at the descriptions of the actors in *Endgame, Long Day's Journey Into Night, and The Balcony* and answer the following questions:

   a) What descriptions best enable you to know what the play will be about?

   b) Why are these descriptions written if the audience never reads them?

   c) If you were an actor, which descriptions would be most helpful to you? Which would be least helpful?
5. If you were a director, which description of sets and actors would you prefer to work with? Why?
6. Which setting is BETTER: *Mother Courage, Waiting For Godot,* or *Endgame* ? What is good about each one? Which one makes you want to see the play? Why?

## Notes

1. There is some evidence of earlier dramatic presentations—in Egyptian culture, for example—but for my purposes these earlier examples are not important.
2. I had an opportunity to attend several sessions of a Lee High School Annex course on drama in the spring, run by Yale drama students. One of the simple acting exercises I participated in was a mirror exercise. One student faces another. One is live, the other is a mirror reflection who must imitate the other's actions. There was also a statue exercises in which one student is a statue under construction. Two other students are sculptors who fashion the statue in a pose. When all statues are completed, they are auctioned off. These exercises can be preceded by some calisthenics to accustom students to gymnastic movement in the English class. See also *Improvisations for* the Theater by Viola Spolin.
3. Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy* (London, Methuen & Co., Ltd. 1953), p. 69.
4. R. R. Palmer, Joel Colton *, A History of the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 7.
5. Francis Fergusson, *The idea of a Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 32.
6. Marcus Konick, *Six Complete World Plays* (New York: Globe Book Company, 1963), p. 614.
7. Eugene Ionesco, *Four Plays* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958), p. 19.
8. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 4.
9. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest,* p. 4.
10. George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1913), p. 7.
11. Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968), p. 110
12. Esslin, p. 110.
13. George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism,* p. 8.

## Student Bibliography:


Clayes, Stanley and David Spencer. *Contemporary Drama* : *13 Plays* . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.

A good collection including Strindberg, Lorca, Miller, Shaw, Chekhov, Williams, and more. The book has introductory letters and statements by the authors.

Corrigan, Robert W. *Sophocles* . New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1971.

Grene, David. *Sophocles I* , New York: Washington Square Press, 1972. Both of these works were used for translation exercises.

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology* . New York: New American Library, 1969. I recommend this edition because it includes Hamilton's entertaining comments.

Ionesco, Eugene. *Four Plays* . New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958.

Konick, Marcus. Six *Complete World Plays* . New York: Globe Book Co., 1963.

This book has an excellent illustrated history of drama as well as a section on stagecraft.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest* New York: Avon Books, 1965.

The introduction contains Wilde's comments on his vision, and descriptions of his costumes and his personal tragedy.


## Teacher Bibliography:


Esslin, Martin. *The Theater of the Absurd* . New York: Anchor Books, 1969.

Esslin can make the absurd accessible to all. This book is excellent; it contains an overview of the movement and comments on individual authors.

Fergusson, Francis. *The Idea of* A *Theater* . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949.

A formalistic overview of the theater, Fergusson's book begins with *Oedipus* and ends with *Murder In The Cathedral* . Fergusson is not always easy to understand, but what he has to say is, upon reflection, exciting.

Fort, Alice B. and Herbert S. Kates. *Minute History of the Drama* . New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1935.

A browsworthy tame full of pictures, historical information, and biographical information on authors. Xeroxes well.

Kitto, H.D.F. *Greek Tragedy* . London: Methuen & Co, 1939.

Norwood, Gilbert. Greek Tragedy. London: Methuen & Co., 1983.

Along with Kitto and Pickard-Cambridge, Norwood gives history and background on the origins of Greek drama and commentary on individual plays. There are anecdotes like this one on the death of Aeschylus: “The story tells how he was sitting on the hillside near the city of Gela when an eagle, flying with a tortoise in its claws in quest of a stone whereon to crush it, dropped its prey upon the bald head of the poet and killed him.” (p.11) It does not say whether his skull cracked the shell for the hungry eagle, but in spite of such omissions, it is a very readable history.

Pickard-Cambridge, Sir Arthur. *Dithyramb, Tragedy And Comedy* . Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962.

Rowe, Kenneth. *A Theater In Your Head* . New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co. 1960.

Rowe’s knowledge of theater is very broad. He addresses himself to the problems of interpretation. See especially Chapters Six and Eight on the meaning of a play, and on traditional modes of dramatic climaxes.

Shaw, George Bernard. The *Quintessence* of *Ibsenism* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1913.

It is true: this man is a good writer. Shaw is opinionated and engaging. He is as good a companion as the subject of his book.