From Literature to Theatre - from time art form to combined art form; from text to performance

If we talk about literature as an art form then probably the first question is what is it medium? The medium is of course words. Words are only valuable as a medium if they are understood. Skillful writers – artists, labor over finding exactly the right words what will say precisely what they are attempting to communicate? In a letter he wrote in 1888 Mark Twain made this very profound observation: “The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter--it's the difference between the lightning bug (firefly) and the lightning.”

Word Choice

We can see how important skillful word selection creates impact. What if Abraham Lincoln had said, “In 1776, the founders of this country created a new representative government here in America”? Where is the power? The art? Contrast that with “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

This concept also has significance in the Church. If President David O. McKay had simply said, “What you do at home is very important.” It would have been one among many prophetic admonitions. Instead his “no other success compensates for failure in the home” is still begin quoted nearly half a century later.

Plot and Theme

There are two broad areas we need to consider within literature. The first of these is plot. The second is theme. Both plot and scheme our central in theater as well and will be discussed again in that section of the reading but to begin our discussion we need to understand the basic definition of each term.

Simply put, plot is the sequence of events – what happens - the action of a work. It’s the storyline. If all an author wanted to do was simply tell a story the literature would not go beyond plot. Plot is a starting point. Great literature moves plot along as a way to explore a theme. Theme is the overall message of writer is trying to present. Seen deals with universal truths, with large ideas, with those parts of the human condition that we think deeply about. To show the relationship between the two here is a poem by the Shelly, called Ozymandias:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away”.

So, let’s look at plot. The storyline of this poem couldn’t be simpler – a man meets someone who went on a trip and saw a broken statue (hardly worth writing a poem about). People haven’t been reading and discussing Ozymandias for 200 years simply because they’re interested in broken statues – or hearing about the vacations of other people. Reflecting for even a few moments lets us realize that Ozymandias is not about a broken statue. The theme of this poem is revealed through the plot. Think about “big picture” items, universal truths- challenges to the human condition. What is Shelly saying here? Is this an exploration of the temporary nature of fame? Of the power of time contrasted with the puniness of humans? How our works in this life will crumble and decay? The answer to all of these might be a resounding “yes.” How can a broken statue lead us to think about all of those issues? That’s art. That’s what we humans, users of symbols are capable of.

Shelley employs an important element of the arts, most used in literature and theatre, irony. A couple of the dictionary definitions of irony can help us understand how important it often is in literature:

1. the use of words to convey a meaning that is opposite of its literal meaning
2. technique of indicating, as through character or plot development, an intention or attitude opposite to that which is actually or ostensibly stated.

Would a mighty person looking on Ozymandias’ nonexistent works despair? Well, yes and no. Yes because they will recognize that’s what their works will come to look like in a few centuries. No because well duh: what works? There’s only a bunch of sand.

**From The Page To The Stage**

Theatre is a collaborative art form. In other words, unlike the sculptor slaving away in a studio with a hunk of marble, a composer banging away at a piano in solitude, or a novelist alone with a pad of paper (or a computer keyboard) a work of theatre is a combined work of specialists working together.

It’s an interesting transformation. A play begins its life as a script, a work of literature. You have probably read several plays during your academic career. Literature as we’ve already learned is a time art. A theatre- or even a simple stage is a space. The transformation of script to play is a remarkable- almost magical process. How will actors speak the written words? What will painters and carpenters create as sets? What lighting and sound issues will technicians deal with? What about make-up? Costumes? What movement will be associated with the words and actions described? How will the director interpret the meaning of the work in order to create a unified vision of all the elements for the audience? How does one prepare for audience reaction?
In western civilization we trace the origins of theatre to Ancient Greece. Our survey of the history of the arts in this course will focus on the period from the Renaissance through the dawn of modernism. Renaissance means “rebirth.” For the people in Europe of the 15th Century the rebirth means a return to the classical roots of ancient Greece and Rome. Greek theatre was associated with the worship of Dionysus.

**Aristotle’s Elements of Theatre**

Even though theatre was associated with Dionysus the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle sought to explore the art form in a logical and systematic (Apollo style) way. In his **POETICS** he discusses six key elements of theatre: Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Music (sometimes translated as melody), and Spectacle.

Aristotle presents them as follows:

**The Plot, then, is the first principle,** and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: **Character holds the second place.** A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colors, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action.

**Third in order is Thought,**—that is, the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances ... **Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids.** Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of character. **Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be, or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.**

**Fourth among the elements enumerated comes Diction;** by which I mean, as has been already said, the expression of the meaning in words; and its essence is the same both in verse and prose.

Of the remaining elements **Song** holds the chief place among the embellishments.

**The Spectacle** has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.

Let’s examine these six elements in a little more detail.

**Plot**

Plot is a very common term in both theatre and literature. Generally speaking it refers to the sequence of events, the story. If we like the story line we’re dealing with the element of plot.

Aristotle makes the following observations about plot:
Plots are either Simple or Complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition.

A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both.

Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity.

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation... Editors’ note: a great example of this reversal and recognition comes in George Lucas’ Star Wars films- not live theatre but widely known. Consider the impact of “Luke, I am your father.” Remember also when instead of killing his son Darth Vader turns on the Emperor to save Luke. These are great reversal and recognition moments. Recognition, then, being between persons, it may happen that one person only is recognized by the other—when the latter is already known—or it may be necessary that the recognition should be on both sides.

Two parts, then, of the Plot—Reversal of the Situation and Recognition—turn upon surprises. A third part is the Scene of Suffering. The Scene of Suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like.

Character
Aristotle writes that “Character holds the second place... the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action.” This “outline” of the protagonist should reveal adequate detail about their personality, without supplying too much extra detail- which would be a distraction. The protagonist of a work should be “a man who is not eminently good and just,-yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. (Note: In Aristotle’s time this error, or tragic flaw was pride-Hubris.) He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous,—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, (Greek Heroes) or other illustrious men of such families.” When considering the element of character we might ask if the attributes of the people are compelling to us- do they have qualities that we can recognize in ourselves? Is their frailty (flaw) evident through the words and actions of the play?

Thought
What does Aristotle mean by, “Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be, or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated”? If we look at his “general maxim” we can see
that the “thought” of Aristotle is best described in our day by terms like “message” or “theme.” In a play like *Macbeth*, the plot presents the actions of the characters, their character is revealed through these actions and their speeches, but the central message of the play deals with the destructive power of ambition— the thought.

**Diction**

This is a term which has a very different connotation in our day. We think of proper speaking of words. What Aristotle suggests is much more closely tied to literature and our discussion of a choice of words. Aristotle writes: *Fourth among the elements enumerated comes Diction; by which I mean, as has been already said, the expression of the meaning in words; and its essence is the same both in verse and prose.* To paraphrase, we can ask, how was language used in the production? Certainly other playwrights besides William Shakespeare have explored universal themes like ambition. Why has his work survived and prospered for so many centuries? Part of the answer lies in this element, his crafting of the words. If Hamlet had just said, “Should I kill myself?” we wouldn’t be talking about Hamlet in our day. But English speaking people everywhere—even those who have never read or seen Hamlet are all familiar with the phrase, “To be or not to be. That is the question.”

**Music**

Aristotle makes almost no comment about this element other than to say, “Of the remaining elements Song holds the chief place among the embellishments.” Some scholars have noted that Aristotle seems to suggest that song is easily understood and identified. It’s worth noting that he doesn’t include any descriptions of what makes for the effective use of music in a theatrical production. Certainly music has a powerful effect in many works of theatre. Opera is the most extreme welding of the musical and theatrical, but even some non-musical stage plays have had music woven into them. Norwegian Edvard Grieg wrote background music to accompany the stage play by Henrick Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Ironically, more than a century later the music is better known than the play. Evidently of the six elements present in this play, music was best received.

**Spectacle**

This final element is certainly a major part of our theatrical experience. Aristotle notes, “the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.” Spectacle includes costuming, make-up, sets, and special effects. We usually associate special effects with movies, but over the years spectacle has been an important part of such plays as *Phantom of the Opera* and the stage version of *Beauty and the Beast*. More than a century ago a stage version of *Ben Hur* featured a rotating stage and live horses for the chariot race sequence. The challenge of spectacle is that it’s always at the mercy of technology and budget, while diction, plot, and character can shine through even in the barest of stages with extremely simple costumes.

**Organization and Structure in Theatre**

Aristotle also points out that the structure of a play (he refers specifically to tragedy)—

Every tragedy falls into two parts,—Complication and Unravelling or Denouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the
Complication; the rest is the Unravelling. By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune. The Unravelling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end.

It is probably helpful to include an additional non-Aristotelian element in theatrical structure: **exposition** (wow, just like in sonata form). In Aristotle’s time everyone in the audience already knew the stories that were to be performed and the characters in them. These audiences were concerned with how skillfully the actors and playwrights presented and interpreted their old favorites. In our time we are often presented new and unfamiliar people and plots, so an exposition step introduces us to the setting and situation. Thus, exposition becomes the first part of theatrical (and literary) structure. Once again we see a three-part structure.

Take a few moments and ponder the similarity of structure in a literary work, a play, or an extended piece of music. Exposition, complication and denouement are not all that different from the exposition, development, and recapitulation of sonata form. One of the keys to better understanding the arts—in fact all of life is developing the ability to recognize reoccurring patterns. There is a beauty and order to things which is far more regular than we might first notice.

**Tragedy and Comedy**

While there are many genres of theatrical works, two broad types tragedy and comedy are most important. In the simplest of terms, a comedy is when the hero overcomes his opposition (it has nothing to do with making you laugh), while a tragedy is the opposite—it’s where the opposition overcomes the hero. But the definition can’t stop there. Tragedy means far more than just “a sad story.” Theater has its origins in ancient Greece, where the Greeks were the first to dare to imitate the gods. Their first plays were conversations between the gods. Only later would playwrights create works telling stories of mere mortals.

Tragedy was to inspire what Aristotle called “fear and pity” (the tragic effect mentioned in the earlier Aristotle excerpt) in the audience, usually by showing us a larger-than-life character who makes a great error. The protagonist (main character) in a tragedy is referred to as a tragic hero because this person is usually of high position but falls due to a character deficiency known as a tragic flaw. This flaw is personal, and usually causes a great mistake to be made, resulting in suffering for both the hero and those around him. By presenting a person of noble stature, someone who should be above the norm and smarter than the average person, but still making a huge mistake and falling from grace, the audience is able to clearly see the evils this flaw could cause in their own lives. In ancient Greek drama the tragedy was always the pride mentioned earlier. From the Renaissance to our day a tragic flaw can be something else— as in the case of Macbeth’s “over-vaulting ambition.”

Comedy is rarely as closely tied to structure as is tragedy. In fact many tragedies employ moments of comic relief as a means of lessening the tension of a moment and to heighten the eventual impact of the final, dramatic climax. Comedies aren’t necessarily about laughs; many don’t have a single laugh in them. (Remember that a comedy is where the main character overcomes his opposition. Nothing in that definition says the story has to be funny.) Considered one of the greatest books ever written, Dante’s Divine Comedy is a very serious tale which traces Dante’s mid-life crisis, his descent through Hell, subsequent passage through Purgatory, and final ascent into Paradise. It’s the story of a man who overcomes his opposition—and as such, it’s a comedy. But don’t buy it if you want a lot of laughs.
One of the most important elements of what constitutes “normal” comedy is the absence of real pain and suffering, so important in other dramatic forms—the pie in the face gag is not about pain. The slapstick of the Three Stooges or Laurel and Hardy causes no serious injury. It’s the same with cartoons; there’s no real pain. Neither do the social blunders of characters in comedies create serious, irreparable damage. In fact Aristotle defined comedy as the presence of the ludicrous and a “defect that is not painful or destructive.” Pain, in and of itself, is certainly not funny. A serious auto accident, with injured people, is not where you find people laughing. Now consider any Tom and Jerry or Roadrunner cartoon. Why can we laugh? It is only in the absence of real, serious consequence that humor occurs.