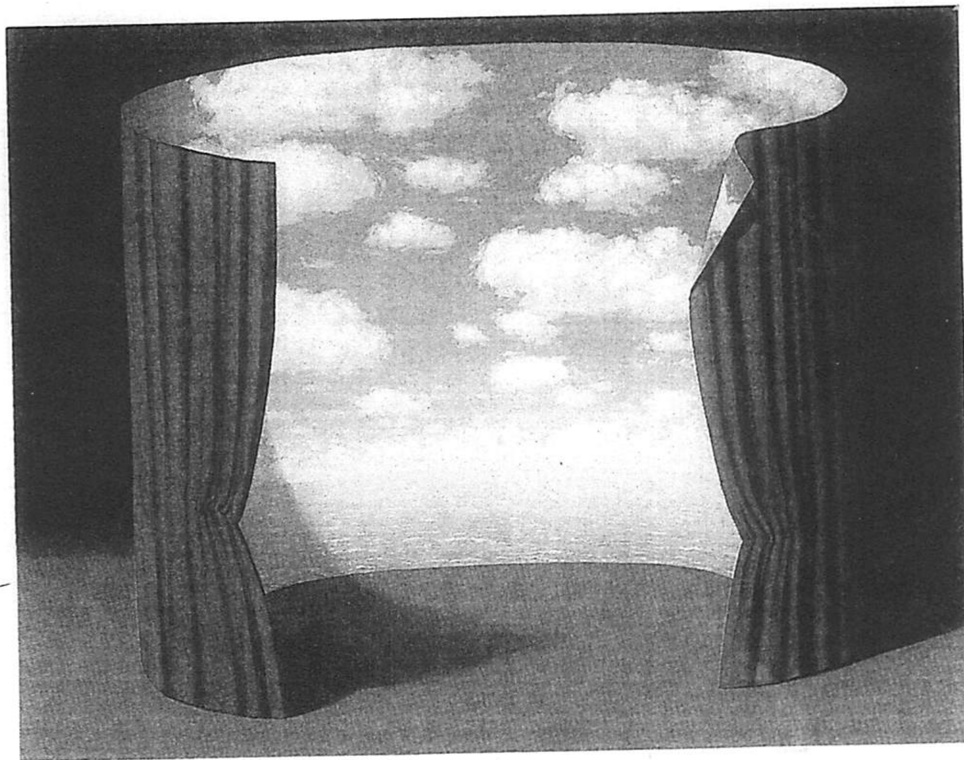
THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

An introduction by **Robert Anderson**

> *"All the world's a stage . . ."*
>
> —William Shakespeare

Eugene O'Neill, America's first great playwright, said that a play should reveal "the most intense basic human interrelationships." Perhaps this is why, over the years, so many playwrights have written about families. Probably nowhere else do we find such intense feelings as those we find within the family.

Even in the happiest families, we have conflicts, great and small. Parents have dreams for their children. Children have conflicting dreams of their own. Children need to belong to the family and to feel its support; they also need to be independent. There are the inevitable strains from living closely together. There are the problems of aging. The conflicts in a family range from mild, funny blow-ups, to battles royal which break families apart.



Memories of a Saint by René Magritte (1960). Oil.

Menil Foundation, Houston.

A scene from Neil Simon's *Lost in Yonkers* (1991), a dark comedy based on the writer's own childhood.

Conflict: The Basis of Drama

Let's imagine a typical family situation:

> Everything is peaceful in the Norton family's home. They have just finished dinner. Then Sara starts the trouble: she tells her brother that she is going to ask for the family car tonight. Her brother, knowing that Sara disobeyed her parents and kept the car out too late the night before, feels a sense of dread and warns Sara not to ask for it. But Sara is going ahead. It is important to her. She fears she might lose her friends if she can't drive them—she *promised*.

Here we have all the elements for the beginning of a drama. One character, Sara, expresses a "want." ("I want the car.") She is our protagonist. A **protagonist** is generally the person who "drives" the action, who has the "want," who takes the step to achieve a goal. Sara has something at stake (her friends), and there is an obstacle or **antagonist** in her way (her parents and their probable refusal to let her have the car).

In dramatic terms, then, we have the **exposition**—the presentation of the characters and their basic situation; we have the foreshadowing, or suggestions, of a **conflict** (Sara's brother has warned her not to ask for the car); and we have a basic **dramatic question**: "Will Sara get what she wants?"

> Sara then goes to her "ally," her mother, and tells her that she wants to use the car. Her mother tells her she can't: the roads are slick with ice. Then, in irritation, she adds something else: she doesn't care for Sara's friends.

The protagonist has now taken her first step and has met with an obstacle and an unexpected complication: she has discovered that her mother doesn't like her friends.

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> Sara ignores what her brother and mother say (the protagonist has to, if we're to have a story), and she puts the question to her father.

Now we are moving toward the drama's **climax**—that moment when our tension and emotions are at a peak, when we watch the characters engage in the final struggle that is going to determine the resolution of the problem. (In cowboy movies, this is the moment of the big shootout on Main Street.)

> Sara makes her request. The battle begins.
>
> Her father not only says "No" because the roads are bad, but he goes on to reveal other feelings; he says that Sara is showing poor judgment and has become irresponsible. Under the pressure of the situation, Mr. Norton, like Mrs. Norton, reveals what he never would have said under other circumstances.
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> Now an argument may follow. The mother at first sides with the father; then she starts to defend her daughter. The brother may either run away from the argument, or join in on Sara's side. "You don't understand her. You don't understand either of us." Blow-up. Tears. The pressure-cooker situation has exposed all the characters to themselves and to one another. Sara storms out of the house. The question asked at the beginning of the story is answered: Sara does not get the car. In most homes, the daughter would return and some compromise would be worked out. In a serious drama, Sara might be "gone" forever.

During the working out of the conflict in this family story, something else has taken place. Relationships have changed, and relationships, and what happens to them, are one of the main elements of a play. Sara, who always thought her parents trusted her, finds out what her parents really think. This, in turn, changes her feelings about them (and about herself).

Characters We Care About

Writing about the family can help the playwright with a basic task—to organize the emotions of the audience, to arouse our interest or sympathy for one or more of the characters. (In the old melodramas, where there were real villains, writers organized the emotions of the audience very simply: early in the play they would turn us against the villain by having him kick a dog.)

We are all more or less familiar with the "cast of characters" in families. Though these characters might all be as unique as thumbprints, they are all as similar as thumbs. When my play *I Never Sang for My Father* was produced, I received a number of letters from people asking questions like "How did you know my father?" Of course, I didn't know *their* fathers, but I knew my own. Thus playwrights may write out of feelings for their own particular family, and if they write truly, they sometimes achieve a universality. They may make the audience understand something about *all* families.

This, of course, is one of the aims of art—to reveal the universal in the particular. The characters in plays may seem larger than life, but they are not bizarre, theatrical creatures. The great plays are able to revitalize the familiar. They help us to see our own lives in perspective—our own parents, our own wives or husbands, our own friends. Playwrights strike notes from their own feelings and experiences, and they hope for a responsive chord from the audience.

The "Shock of Recognition"

A play, then, actually exists halfway between the stage and the audience. By choosing the familiar ground of the family, the playwright sometimes finds it easier to "reach" an audience. Spectators in the theater are often doing two things at once: they are watching a play on the stage, and at the same time they are relating it to their own experiences. They are feeling what is known as "the shock of recognition." *"How did you know my father?"*

The four plays in this book dramatize conflicts within the general framework of the family. They examine four easily recognized situations about which hundreds of plays, films, and television dramas have been written. In *The Miracle Worker,* there is a family with a handicapped child. In *Visitor from Forest Hills,* there is a frightened bride. In *The Mother,* there are the problems a family faces with an aging parent. In *Romeo and Juliet,* there are the young, impulsive lovers who will marry despite all obstacles. In the case of Romeo and Juliet, the protagonists' obstacle is a family feud. In more modern plays based on this situation, the obstacles might be race, religion, or social station, as in the musical version of Shakespeare's play—the Bernstein-Sondheim-Laurents *West Side Story.*

"Is It True?"

While playwrights write out of what they know, out of what concerns them, probably very little of their work is strictly autobiographical. The Nobel-Prize-winning novelist William Faulkner said that a writer needs "experience, observation, and imagination." Writers rarely limit themselves to re-creating an actual person as a character in a play. Playwrights may base a character on a person they know, but then they invent and expand to suit the needs of the story. A painter may use a model for a pose or an outline, but after a while, he will become more interested in what is on the canvas. The artist will develop the painting so that it ends up scarcely resembling the original model.

An example of a dramatist who expanded and invented to suit the particular aims of each play was Eugene O'Neill. He used his family as the basis for the comic and sentimental play called *Ah, Wilderness!* as well as for the tragic play called *Long Day's Journey into Night.* The same family—very different plays!

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Drama Is a Verb

The dynamic, or drive, of each play in this book is the same: people we care about struggle through crucial situations because they have something important at stake. Note the word *struggle*. *Drama* is, in a sense, a verb. Drama should involve action, and that action can be verbal or physical. In our Norton family story, the action was verbal, as each person in the family tried to achieve his or her ends with words. (The gunfight at high noon would be physical action.)

A Playwright's Concerns: Feeling, Story, and Form

When playwrights sit down to write plays, they have many things to consider. First, they must decide if their feeling about the material is strong enough to hold their interest for the one to three years it might take to write the play. Will they be able to convey this feeling of excitement or humor or emotion to an audience? Mildness is a curse in the theater, and playwrights have to consider whether the feelings they are communicating will have a strong impact.

Next, playwrights must ask whether the story they want to tell is a dramatic one. Does it involve interesting people in a conflict, which moves to a crisis and a climax?

Finally, playwrights must consider the form in which they will write. Probably most of us are more aware of form in painting. We know that a picture may be painted in the more or less realistic style of a Rembrandt or in the impressionistic style of a Monet or in the cubist style of a Picasso.

In somewhat the same way, the story of a play can be told in various forms. It can be told in a conventional straightforward way (often called a linear style), with a beginning, a middle, and an end, presented in chronological order. Or the story can move back and forth in time, with such devices as flashbacks or dream sequences. One recent play, *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter, actually begins at the end of the story and ends at the beginning.

The plays in this book are all more or less conventional in their form. They tell their stories from beginning to end. *The Miracle Worker* uses some memory flashbacks in which we hear the voices that Annie remembers from her childhood. Otherwise, the play moves ahead in a straightforward manner.

Thus, though these plays are varied in style and tone, the pleasure, even the "shock of recognition," awaits you in each one. See if you think that these particular characters and their conflicts reveal universal truths. Do you ask: *"How did you know my family?"*

Rapunzel lets down her hair. A scene from *Into the Woods* (1987), a musical comedy by Stephen Sondheim.