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Modern Theater and the Tragic in Europe

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Prelude

The term "modern" is a controversial one. Its ambiguity may be traced to its etymology: deriving from the Latin *modo*, meaning "lately, just now," the word has had a relative definition since its beginnings. Literary and cultural historians have nonetheless sought to define it in absolute terms, seeking variously to locate the origins of "the modern" in Europe in the post-medieval era, the Renaissance, or the years around 1800; "high modernism" in fiction, poetry, and the plastic arts is usually defined as the period from 1910 to 1930. Where European theater is concerned, however, there is general agreement that modernism begins with the work of Ibsen; the location of its endpoint depends on how (or whether) one defines postmodern theater – whether beginning with World War II or later. My treatment of modern European theater and the tragic will focus on the years from roughly 1880 to 1910, a period that can be said to represent modern theater at its apex. In the broadest terms – terms that will be elaborated and qualified in the course of this chapter – the "modernism" of tragic theater in this era lies in the increased heterogeneity of its form and in the heightened extent to which it explores the influence of gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic factors in determining human lives. I will therefore concentrate on four parameters through which modern European tragic theater may usefully be examined: class, gender, sexuality, and form. The plays I focus on are meant to be not exhaustive but representative.

Before discussing modern European tragic theater itself it will be helpful to look at its origins, which extend at least as far back as the eighteenth century. Many of the formal features that characterize modern theater originate in the rejection of classical conventions that is generally termed "anti-Aristotelian." Although some of these traits are evident in the theater of Shakespeare, they are more self-consciously and systematically advocated in the drama and dramatic theory of several of his German-language champions writing in the eighteenth century, above all Gotthold E. Lessing

and Jakob M. R. Lenz. Both were motivated by a reaction against seventeenth-century neoclassical French tragedians like Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine and their followers in Germany, notably Johann C. Gottsched, whose theater Lessing calls "Frenchified theater" (Lessing, "Siebzehnter Brief, die neueste Literatur betreffend" [The seventeenth letter concerning the newest literature, 1759], in Herzfeld-Sander 1985: 2). Both Lessing and Lenz attack the stilted, pompous speech characteristic of neoclassical theater, advocating instead a language produced by feeling. Both attack the unities of time, place, and action prescribed by Aristotle's *Poetics* and artificially observed, in their opinion, by neoclassical dramatists; as Lessing writes, "As far as I am concerned Voltaire's and Maffei's *Merope* may extend over eight days and the scene may be laid in seven places in Greece! If only they had the beauties to make me forget these pedantries!" (Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* [Hamburg dramaturgy, 1769], in Herzfeld-Sander 1985: 12). Lenz is even more vociferous in his *Anmerkungen übers Theater* [Notes on the theater, 1774]:

> I must still fire back at one of [Aristotle's] fundamental laws which makes so much noise simply because it is so small, and that is the dreadfully and lamentably famous edict of the three unities. And what, my dears, are the names of these three unities? . . . I want to mention to you a hundred unities, all of which, however, always remain the one. Unity of country, unity of language, unity of religion, unity of morals – well, what is it going to be? Always the same, always and eternally the same. The poet and the public must feel but not classify the one unity. (Herzfeld-Sander 1985: 21)

The nationalistic dimensions of these aesthetically driven debates, reflecting the age-old enmity between Germany and France as well as Germany's eighteenth-century political affiliations with England, are evident throughout, as when Lenz employs the differences between the English and the French garden to illustrate the open and closed forms of the drama, respectively. But the contrast Lessing and Lenz draw between the rigid formality of French neoclassical theater and the emotional power of Shakespeare's drama endures in aesthetic writing for decades, finding perhaps its culmination in Stendhal's *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823). In some ways, the debate between the neoclassicists and those advocating a move toward looser, more open forms in the theater is reminiscent of "la querelle des anciens et des modernes," the aestheric war waged in seventeenth-century France between those arguing in favor of the imitation of Greek and Latin models and those defending contemporary French literature in the name of progress. That some of the same authors – notably Racine and Corneille – were viewed as progressive in the first instance and as retrograde in the second underlines the relative nature of aesthetic debate. Yet the anti-Aristotelian impulse, comprising a revolt against conventions which had dominated Western theater for some 2000 years, became so powerful and widespread that it not only endured but formed the foundation of modern theater.

Lessing's use in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* of the term *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* (domestic or bourgeois tragedy) points to one of the major innovations on the path to modern tragic drama. The first major bourgeois or domestic tragedy is conventionally

identified as George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), which treats the fall of a young merchant's apprentice. In his lengthy dedication of the play to a member of Parliament, Lillo justifies the appearance of middle-class characters in tragedy for the common-sense reason that the middle class is larger than the nobility:

> [T]ragedy is so far from losing its dignity by being accommodated to the circumstances of the generality of mankind that it is more truly august in proportion to the extent of its influence and the numbers that are properly affected by it, as it is more truly great to be the instrument of good to many who stand in need of our assistance than to a very small part of that number. (Lillo 1965: 3)

Similarly, overthrowing Aristotle's well-known convention specifying that the protagonist of tragedy "must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous" (Aristotle 1961: 76) – a dictum embodied in the princes and heroes of the French neoclassical tragedies – Lessing argues in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* that we are moved by what we know. As bourgeois citizens, we are familiar not with the nobility but with other members of the middle class, above all with our families. To highlight this point Lessing quotes the *Poétique française* (French poetics, 1763) of the French writer and encyclopedist Jean François Marmontel:

> We wrong the human heart, we misread nature, if we believe that it requires titles to rouse and touch us. The sacred names of friend, father, lover, husband, son, mother, of mankind in general, these are far more pathetic than aught else and retain their claims forever. What matters the rank, the surname, the genealogy of the unfortunate man whose easy good nature towards unworthy friends has involved him in gambling and who loses over this his wealth and honour and now sighs in prison distracted by shame and remorse? (Herzfeld-Sander 1985: 7)

To be sure, tragic drama has focused on the family since the beginnings of Western theater; one need think only of the Theban plays of Sophocles or of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy. As Bennett Simon observes, "war against the outside world in epic becomes war within the family in tragedy" (1988: 21). But in contrast to the royal purview of classical, Renaissance, and neoclassical tragedy, in which the fate of nations often hangs in the balance, from the eighteenth century onward the scope of tragedy can generally be said to shrink and its characters to descend in social standing. Today's audiences have become so accustomed to commonplace characters onstage that it is difficult to appreciate the revolutionary importance of this development for modern tragic theater.

In discussing the term *bürgerlich* (bourgeois or domestic) in the eighteenth century, Karl Guthke notes that the bourgeois defines himself in relation to the community, to which he is bound by virtue of duties and responsibilities, and at a distance from the larger world of nations, rulers, and politics (1994: 10). Yet the domestic tragedy often has sociocritical implications, insofar as the family can function as a microcosm for society at large. This is more the case in Lessing's bourgeois tragedy *Emilia Galotti*

(1772) than in his play modeled on Lillo's *The London Merchant, Miss Sara Sampson* (1755). In an updating of the Roman story of Virginia, the character of the title, who belongs to the affluent middle class, is abducted with her aristocratic fiancé by the lustful local prince with the help of his amoral and devious chamberlain, who has the fiancé killed. The virtuous but vulnerable Emilia Galotti persuades her father to stab her to death rather than see her lose her innocence to the prince. That the play critiques *in nuce* the impotence of the middle class vis-à-vis the absolute monarchs ruling German principalities in the eighteenth century was forcefully underlined two years after its premiere by the conclusion of Goethe's popular novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (The sorrows of young Werther, 1774), in which a copy of *Emilia Galotti* is found lying open on the desk of the character of the title after he shoots himself, a victim (among other things) of rejection by the local court.

The emphasis on social criticism constitutes another major contribution of the domestic or bourgeois tragedy to the evolution of modern tragic theater. To present things schematically, classical tragedy can be described as the tragedy of fate, and Shakespearean and romantic tragedy as the tragedy of character. In the words of Walter Benjamin, in "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy" (1916), "[C]lassical tragedy is characterized by the ever more powerful eruption of tragic forces. It deals with the tragedy of fate, Shakespeare with the tragic hero, the tragic action. Goethe rightly calls him Romantic" (Benjamin [1916] 1996: 56). I would extend this schema by suggesting that in modern tragedy, the role of fate is taken over by socioeconomic forces – attitudes toward class, gender, and sexuality – as these affect or interact with character.

All these forces come to the fore in the play often called the first modern European tragedy, Georg Büchner's unfinished drama *Woyzeck* (written in 1836–7). Based on an actual ex-soldier who was executed for killing his mistress, the simple barber Woyzeck is depicted as a creature without free will, exploited by a series of caricatured figures. Portraying his social, economic, and psychological disintegration, the play is an appropriate vehicle for assessing the usefulness of a Marxist approach to literature and theater, particularly in view of Büchner's other writings and activities opposing class oppression. Much in the drama attributes Woyzeck's victimization to his poverty. When the Captain persists in making fun of him and in lambasting his actions as immoral, Woyzeck himself responds that money is the key to everything and that the lower classes are correspondingly doomed:

> When you're poor like us, sir... It's the money, the money! If you haven't got the money... I mean you can't bring the likes of us into the world on decency. We're flesh and blood too. Our kind doesn't get a chance in this world or the next. If we go to heaven they'll put us to work on the thunder. (Büchner [1836–7] 1971: 108)

Similarly, Woyzeck functions as a guinea pig in inhumane scientific experiments for the sake of the pittance the Doctor pays him. A physician himself, Büchner was in an excellent position to satirize the scientific zeal of the medical profession.

The markedly existential dimensions of the play, however, encapsulated by Woyzeck's observation that "Every man is a bottomless pit; you get dizzy when you look down" (Büchner [1836–7] 1971: 120), thwart a one-sidedly Marxist interpretation. In the course of the drama Woyzeck's actions become increasingly nervous and harried, his demeanor more and more hunted and desperate. Yet mental cruelty, exploitation, and privation hurt him far less than does his lover Marie's betrayal of him with the virile drum major, since she is the only thing that gives his life meaning. Like so much else in the play, the motives behind Marie's infidelity with the drum major are ambiguous: does Büchner intend to make a negative statement about female sexuality or to portray her as a victim of circumstance comparable to Woyzeck? On the one hand, she expresses clear sexual admiration for the drum major, describing him as "Broad as an ox and a beard like a lion" (Büchner [1836–7] 1971: 116), yet on the other hand she laments that "The likes of me have only a hole like this to call our own, and a bit of broken mirror. But my lips are as red as madame's with her mirrors down to the floor and her fine gentlemen to kiss her hand. And I'm just a poor girl" (Büchner [1836–7] 1971: 114).

The complex heterogeneity of his characters' motivation is a reflection of Büchner's modernity. As a quasi-naturalistic case study of a working-class man driven by jealousy to murder his beloved, *Woyzeck* is far ahead of its time. Its formal features also point forward to twentieth-century theater: its scenic structure, which is so nonlinear that the order of the scenes cannot be definitively established; its elliptical, at times illogical dialogue, much of which consists of characters talking past one another; its use of dialect and the inclusion of songs; its employment of unnamed types as featured characters; its strikingly graphic imagery. It is little wonder that the play has invited adaptation by artists from Alban Berg, who transformed it into an opera, to Werner Herzog, who reworked it for the cinema.

Class

Büchner's serious treatment of the proletariat in tragic theater, representing a far cry from the Aristotelian dictum that the personages of tragedy should be illustrious and affluent, found followers, though not immediately (it should be noted that the text of *Woyzeck* was lost until 1879, when it was discovered and published for the first time as *Wozzeck*; the play was not performed until 1913). The working-class tragedy does not come into its own in Europe until the end of the nineteenth century, which was the great period of the middle class in theater and literature. One of the dramatists best known for his treatment of the working class is the German naturalist writer Gerhart Hauptmann, who created a lasting monument to the proletariat in *Die Weber* (The weavers, 1892), based on the historical revolt of the Silesian weavers in 1844. Hauptmann also focuses tragic attention on lower-class characters in his plays *Hannes Himmelfahrt* (Hannele, 1893), which features an abused child dying in a poorhouse; *Florian Geyer* (1896), which deals with the peasant wars; *Fuhrmann Henschel*

(Drayman Henschel, 1898); and *Rose Bernd* (1903), a latter-day treatment of the infanticide motif in its depiction of the sexual victimization of a peasant girl.

More consistent attention to the peasantry is found in the plays of Irish dramatist John Millington Synge. Several of these are dark comedies, such as *The Shadow of the Glen* (1904), *The Well of the Saints* (1905), *The Tinker's Wedding* (1907) – and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), the humorous elements of which are countered by the play's anti-comic ending, in which the girl – Pegeen Mike – does not win her man – the "playboy" and self-proclaimed father-killer Christy Mahon – but rather famously "loses" him. This conclusion is especially illustrative of what Arthur Ganz has called "the essential sadness lying beneath even the brightest of Synge's plays" (1980: 28).

But Synge's fatalistic vision of the Irish peasantry is more fully realized in his two tragic plays, *Riders to the Sea* (1903) and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910). *Riders to the Sea* was Synge's most successful work during his lifetime and is probably still the most frequently performed of his one-act dramas. The setting is desolate – a peasant cottage on one of the Aran Islands, located off the west coast of Ireland. The play presents an extremely economical dichotomy between turn-of-the-century naturalism and mythic timelessness: on the one hand, a lower-class milieu, a bickering family, and the use of dialect; on the other, a stark fatalism centering on a latter-day Niobe in the person of Maurya, who has already lost her husband and four sons to the sea. The dominant mood of the play is one of waiting for the inevitable, as Maurya's two daughters are confronted with the arrival of some clothing from a drowned man and must determine whether it belongs to their absent brother, at the same time that another brother, Bartley, sets off for the coast. In contrast to Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* (1956), however, in *Riders to the Sea* that which the characters are waiting for actually arrives: by the play's end the family learns not only that the dead man is their brother but that Bartley has drowned as well.

The play's one-act structure allows the tension produced by dread to be sustained and intensified throughout. The fatalistic atmosphere of impending doom and death, given clearest voice in Maurya's repeated direful predictions that her two surviving sons will go the way of the other four, is enhanced by frequent references to the elements – the wind, waves, and rocks that have been so powerful in determining this family's destiny. While people of all classes live under the sway of natural forces, the peasant background of this family both underlines their victimization and foregrounds the fact that the lower classes are worthy subjects of tragedy. The extreme degree of loss in the play – the family father and six sons by its end – seems to epitomize the lack of control human beings have over their fates and allies Synge's brief play with classical tragedy. The play's determinism is further emphasized through reference to the impotence of Christianity, manifested in the insistence of the local priest that God will not leave Maurya alive without any of her sons, although this is precisely what occurs.

Deirdre of the Sorrows moves expressly into the realm of myth, in this case the same Irish legends treated by William B. Yeats, with a cast of characters including Fergus

and his friend Conchubor, the elderly King of Ulster. As in Synge's other plays, however, the main character is from the lower classes: in an Irish version of the Cinderella story, the beautiful peasant girl Deirdre is promised to Conchubor, who offers her jewels and other elegant gifts in place of the nuts and twigs that she is fond of gathering in the hills. But she willfully thwarts him to marry the young and handsome Naisi, despite the frequently intoned prophesy that her union with him will bring disaster on him and his two brothers – the explanation of the "sorrows" associated with her name. When Fergus succeeds seven years later in convincing Deirdre and Naisi that Conchubor wants peace and that they should return to his realm, the prophesy is fulfilled, as Conchubor has Naisi and his brothers killed to avenge his marriage to Deirdre. True to her oath that she will not live without Naisi, Deirdre stabs herself and falls into his grave.

Such a brief summary does justice neither to the lyrical quality of the play's language nor to the psychological complexity with which Synge endows the transmitted Irish legend. The true tragedy of the play can be said to be the transience of beauty and of life in general – a favorite theme of turn-of-the-century artists. Yet Synge's characters approach this theme from another angle, not lamenting the finite nature of life but rather recognizing that it is precisely in the brevity of treasured experience that its value lies; as Deirdre tells Naisi, "It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest if it's for a short space only" (Synge 1968: 209). The actual reasons for their return to Conchubor's tealm belie their ttust in his offer of peace: their awareness that the perfect love they experienced for seven years cannot be extended and can never be replicated, and their concomitant dread of seeing each other grow old. Hence through the mythic veil of the play's setting it is possible to read a comment on the institution of marriage in Synge's own day – not only on the dire consequences of a mismatch, but on the tedium that can ensue even in the most promising of unions.

Gender

The topic of marriage leads us to one of the most perceptive analysts of this institution, Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen's importance in the history of theater cannot be overestimated. He has been called the father of modern drama, and all subsequent dramatists have had to come to terms with him either directly or indirectly. He was the first major playwright to deal convincingly with highly controversial, topical subjects, for example syphilis (in *Ghosts*, 1881), and he was one of the fitst European dramatists after Büchner to use theater as an expression of social revolt. He was a pivotal figure in the movement of tragedy from the sphere of royalty to the living rooms of the middle class, and in his refinement of close psychological analysis in the drama he did a great deal to render prose dialogue more natural and verisimilar.

Few issues receive more serious attention in Ibsen's *oeuvre* than the situation of women. At a time when women throughout the wotld were fighting for equal rights,

above all for the right to vote, it was virtually impossible for serious writers and artists to ignore them. While women's assertion of their right to equality made some male artists nervous and inspired a vivid array of antifeminist and even misogynist images in turn-of-the-century European culture, a small number of men jumped onto the feminist bandwagon. Ibsen's own statements on the subject vary. In a speech made to laborers in Trondheim in 1885 he pledged his intention of working to improve the status of workers and women, yet in a speech given in 1898 at a banquet in his honor by the Norwegian Women's Rights League he avows: "I . . . must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general" (Ibsen 1972: 65). Thus although Ibsen was widely perceived to be a supporter of the feminist cause, a belief especially fueled by *A Doll House* (1879), at the conclusion of which Nora Helmer leaves her oppressive husband and small children to educate and discover herself, in fact he eschewed ideological labels and held views that were more nuanced and ambivalent than those at either end of the feminist/antifeminist spectrum.

Ibsen's nuanced views on women are memorably reflected in his tragic drama *Hedda Gabler* (1890). On one level this middle-class drawing-room drama is a study of what can happen when a spirited woman marries a pedantic, scholarly man unsuited to her. More broadly, it explores the clash between a woman whose temperament exceeds the bounds of conventional femininity at the time – conditioned as she is by factors of heredity and environment – and the circumstances within which she is confined. Hedda Gabler has frequently been viewed as a termagant, embodying a highly negative conception of femininity. She appears spoiled and self-centered, and her behavior is often downright bitchy: she financially manipulates her husband Tesman and treats him with belittling sarcasm; deliberately hurts the feelings of his elderly aunt, Juliana Tesman; is physically cruel to her old friend Thea Elvsted when she suddenly turns up from out of the past; and burns the sole copy of the most recent book by Løvborg, her former admirer and her husband's rival.

Yet much in Hedda's temperament is explained by looking, as Ibsen so often encourages his audiences to do, at the circumstances in which she grew up. The dominant influence on the young Hedda is intimated even before the action of the play begins, in the reference in the stage directions to "a portrait of a handsome, elderly man in a general's uniform" (Ibsen 1965: 695). Her upbringing without a mother and under the influence of a military father produces an independent, strong-willed young woman who is more interested in horses, pistols, and competition than in the occupations typical for girls at the time. That Ibsen titles his play with her maiden name, although it deals with her life after marriage, reflects his desire "to indicate thereby that as a personality she is to be regarded rather as her father's daughter than as her husband's wife" (Ibsen 1966: 500).

Hedda's tragedy, however, is that she is nonetheless Tesman's wife, a role that in turn-of-the-century Europe was severely restrictive. Riding and shooting are the only men's activities available to her, since as a woman she is excluded from the realm of

public activity. To a considerable extent, she lives through the men she knows. Already as a girl she took vicarious pleasure in hearing Løvborg's stories of drinking and womanizing, things she was officially forbidden to know about. The gender division of the day is poignantly evident in her response to family friend Judge Brack's question about whether there is no goal in life she can work toward; she replies that she is thinking of getting Tesman to go into politics. When Brack, disturbed by her freewheeling hand with the pistols she has inherited from her father, asks her what she is shooting at, her response can be read as symbolic of her activity in general: "Oh, I was just shooting into the sky" (Ibsen 1965: 722). Her motivation in sending the alcoholic Løvborg off to Brack's drinking party is telling: "For once in my life, I want to have power over a human being" (Ibsen 1965: 745).

The extent to which Hedda is restricted because of her position as a middle-class wife is epitomized in her pregnancy, which is alluded to obliquely several times in the play. In contrast to Juliana Tesman, who delights in the role of caretaker, and Thea Elvsted, who happily acts as midwife to Løvborg's books, Hedda is wholly unmaternal and has no desire to have a child. She is a consummate embodiment of the process Michel Foucault has described as the "hysterization" of the female body, one of the mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex that he believes to have intensified during the nineteenth century. The import of hysterization, or the reduction of the woman to her bodily femininity, was to tie women to their reproductive function (Foucault [1976] (1978): 103–4). Exemplifying Foucault's claim that "the Mother, with her negative image of 'nervous woman,' constituted the most visible form of this hysterization" (Foucault [1976] (1978): 104), Hedda manifests hysterical behavior throughout the play, constantly pacing the floor, opening the curtains, raising her arms and clenching her fists; her pinching, slapping, and dragging of Thea Elvsted can likewise be regarded as hysterical actions.

The contrast to Nora Helmer of *A Doll House* is illuminating. Nora too is portrayed as suffocating in a marriage to an oppressive husband, is confined by conventional expectations for women, and exhibits hysterical symptoms, most graphically manifested in the tarantella she dances. (Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément have argued that the tarantella, danced by women in southern Italy in simulation of a reaction to the spider's bite, functions as a kind of hysterical catharsis; Cixous and Clément [1975] 1986: 19–22). Yet Nora ultimately has the courage to leave her restrictive environment and strike out on her own. Hedda Gabler, by contrast, is for all her independent thinking much more concerned with propriety, with what people think. She confides to Brack that she married Tesman because her "time was up" (Ibsen 1965: 725) – in other words, because she had reached the limit of the age where people expected her to marry. She is throughout concerned with doing what is "proper" and with avoiding public humiliation. Ultimately, when faced with the choice between an adulterous relationship with Brack and the scandalous revelation that she gave Løvborg the pistol with which he accidentally shot himself, she can tolerate neither alternative. Trapped on the one hand by her status as a female and on the other by her social conditioning, she faces a tragic impasse. Where Nora moves

from hysteria to feminism, Hedda remains trapped in hysteria and its extreme consequence, self-destruction.

Sexuality

Alongside male dramatists like Ibsen, who were at least partially sympathetic to the women's cause, a number of female dramatists make their mark on the modern theater in both the United Stares and Europe. Although not part of the canon of world theater, one play by a woman worth singling out for mention because of its unusually candid treatment of sexuality is Else Lasker-Schüler's *Die Wupper* (The Wupper River, 1909). Lasker-Schüler is one of the more colorful figures in the German literary tradition. Her second husband was the editor of one of the leading expressionist literary journals in Germany, and she produced some of the finest expressionist poetry in the German language. Following her second divorce she cultivated a self-consciously bohemian way of life, living on a pittance, spending her days in bars, circuses, and cafés, frequently wearing Middle Eastern garb, and often cross-dressing.

Die Wupper reflects Lasker-Schüler's unconventional attitudes toward sexuality, class, and dramatic form. The play is formally too loose to be called a tragedy per se, but its entire worldview is tragic: it is pervaded by a sense of life as incomprehensible and pointless that points forward to the theater of the absurd. Set in one of the most industrialized regions of Germany, the textile-producing area along the Wupper River in northetn Westphalia, the play juxtaposes workers with members of the managerial class in a virtually unprecedented manner. The interaction between the classes, especially of an erotic nature, is microcosmically depicted in the relationships between two families, the Pius clan, who are factory workers, and the family of Frau Sonntag, a factory owner. In the course of the play we witness sadomasochistic games between Carl Pius and Frau Sonntag's daughter Marta, Frau Sonntag's son Heinrich joking about kissing Carl's grandmother, this same grandmother attempting to interest Carl in Marta by showing him a nude photograph of her and seeking to arouse his passion for the lower-class girl Lieschen, Carl's confession that he was fond of doing needlework as a boy and the concomitant homosexual overtones in his relationship with Marta's brother Eduard, and a relationship between Lieschen and Heinrich that leads to Heinrich's demise. These transnormative sexual activities openly thwart the traditional patriarchal family structure dominant in Imperial Germany, in which – officially speaking – father knows best, women know their place, and sex occurs only between married partners and is not to be talked about.

But the play's most striking challenge to traditional sexual norms is posed by the three vagrants who hover around the edges of the action, appearing at critical moments in the play: Tall Anna, a transvestite who wears articles of women's clothing, speaks in a high voice, whimpers like a woman, and plays on his harmonica a melancholic melody that is heard at other points in the play as well: "Oh, dear Augustine, everything is lost, lost, lost" (Lasker-Schüler 1997: 35 *et passim*);

Pendelfrederech, who wears a patch over his oozing eye, mutters constantly, and exhibitionistically displays his genital *Pendel* (pendulum); and Glassy Amadeus, an androgynous figure who can interpret dreams. These three characters are completely marginal, living in nature and outside the world of work, yet with their oblique commentary on the play's action their function is analogous to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy.

The sexual and class heterogeneity of *Die Wupper* is paralleled by a highly mixed form. Its treatment of the proletariat in an industrial milieu – here, the dyers and weavers of the Wupper valley – links it to the naturalist drama of the 1890s, as does its candid portrayal of the harshness of the workers' lives – their poverty, alcoholism, and the earthy details associated with their labor. Also classically naturalistic is Lasker-Schüler's replication of the Low German dialect of the region. And yet her talent as an expressionist poet is evident in the play's lyrical language, graphic imagery, striking use of color, and visionary sets. Like much later expressionist drama, the play contains little conflict or suspense and consists of a series of episodic scenes, although it maintains formal division into acts.

Following the period in which naturalist theater flourished and preceding the true era of expressionist drama, then, *Die Wupper* manifests features of both modes and is stylistically unclassifiable. Critics in Lasker-Schüler's day, baffled by the play's eclecticism and aware of the identity of its author, labeled its style "feminine." Yet in view of the drama's subversion of conventional attitudes toward sexuality with an eye to revealing the degree to which they are socially constructed, it is more accurate to call the play modern.

Form

Language

The extent to which Anton Chekhov's dramas are tragic has been debated. On the one hand, it is noted that the plays do not end with the death(s) of the main character(s), although deaths do occur; two of the plays are subtitled "Comedy." On the other hand, it has been suggested, given the dismal view of existence conveyed by the plays, that the characters' real tragedy is the fact that they survive. Yet all the plays contain a great deal of black humor, and the most appropriate term for their genre is probably tragicomedy. Already in Chekhov's day a theater critic claimed that the development of modern drama begins with the fusion of tragedy and comedy (Friedell 1906: 543), whereby "modern" has its relative meaning of "recent." In any case, after Chekhov tragicomedy becomes the dominant mode of theater in the twentieth century.

Much of the tragicomedy of Chekhov's plays stems from the fact that his characters are deadened by the ennui of provincial life, ache with love for someone who does not love them in return, are plagued by the gap between intention and action, experience a resulting sense of frustrated ineffectualness, speak and are misunderstood or unheard. In their dazed helplessness Chekhov's men and women often resemble somnambulists, a

comparison that is verbalized again and again. To mention only a few instances, near the beginning of *The Sea Gull* (1896) Sorin remarks that he feels as if he were "in a nightmare" (Chekhov 1960: 82), and his sister Arkadina's insistence at the opening of her son Treplev's play that "We are asleep" (Chekhov 1960: 90) figuratively foreshadows the listlessness with which she and her entourage will drift through the drama in which *they* are featured. Similarly, in *The Cherry Orchard* (1903), both the landowner Madame Ranevskaya and the merchant Lopakhin express incredulity by claiming that they are dreaming (Chekhov 1960: 295, 338).

Chekhov conveys the experiences of his characters – unrequited love, provincial ennui to the point of feeling dazed, unrealized intentions – through a form of dialogue that is in fact no dialogue at all but rather a talking past, a language of misunderstanding and misdirection. One especially extensive and graphic example occurs at the beginning of *The Three Sisters* (1900), where two of the sisters' nostalgic comments about returning to Moscow and about their missed opportunities are punctuated by rude exclamations from the officers in the next room:

> *Olga*: I remembet perfectly that by this time, at the beginning of May in Moscow, everything was in bloom, it was warm, all bathed in sunshine. Eleven years have passed, but I remember it all as though we had left there yesterday. Oh, God! This morning I woke up, I saw this flood of sunlight, saw the spring, and joy stirred in my soul, I had a passionate longing to go home again.
>
> *Chebutykin*: Like hell he did!
>
> *Tuzenbach*: Of course, that's nonsense . . .
>
> *Irina*: To go to Moscow. To sell the house, make an end of everything here, and go to Moscow . . .
>
> *Olga*: Yes! To go to Moscow as soon as possible.
>
> (*Chebutykin and Tuzenbach laugh.*) . . .
>
> *Olga*: It's all good, all from God, but it seems to me that if I had married and stayed at home all day, it would have been better. (*Pause*) I should have loved my husband.
>
> *Tuzenbach* (*to Solyony*): You talk such nonsense I'm tired of listening to you.
>
> (Chekhov 1960: 207–9)

Rather than responding to the women's words, the men's lines serve as an indirect commentary on them, intimating the futility of the desires they express. Another striking example of the technique of talking past is found in *The Cherry Orchard*, in the preoccupation of Madame Ranevskaya's brother with billiards; most of his lines, describing shots he imagines himself taking, have little to do with the surrounding dialogue or action and point up instead the aimlessness of his life and his isolation in his obsession.

The technique of characters talking past, rather than to, each other is found in much of modern drama, reflecting the degree to which the theater of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is concerned with the difficulties and limitations of verbal communication. Chekhov's use of the technique highlights his

portrayal of a malaise that transcends the social problems of a specific era and can therefore be termed existential. In both these features, his drama anticipates the postmodern theater of Beckett, Pinter, Genet, and others.

Space

In modern theater Else Lasker-Schüler is an early practitioner in a wide range of experiments in dramatic form. In the course of the twentieth century theatrical space takes on increasingly symbolic dimensions, a development previewed in realistic drawing-room drama. Ibsen exploits the potential of his one-room settings by concentrating the action in the room the audience can see but extending the room beyond its physical dimensions through references to conversations and other sounds heard in surrounding rooms, as well as to places offstage. In a notable example, in *Ghosts* (1881), Mrs. Alving's overhearing the struggle and dialogue in the next room between her son Osvald and her servant girl alerts her to the presence of "ghosts" – insofar as Osvald is repeating with the servant the behavior of Mrs. Alving's deceased husband with the girl's mother. In Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884) the outside world is microcosmically brought indoors: the attic room in which the duck is kept is so resonant with elements from the outdoors – poultry, pigeons, rabbits, a straw basket and trough of water for the duck, and skylights that literally allow part of the outside world to enter – that it resembles a kind of miniature indoor forest. The tension between the visible spaces and those evoked audially or verbally adds considerably to the dramatic power of Ibsen's settings.

But the most radical use of spatial symbolism in modern theater is found in the drama of August Strindberg, above all in *A Dream Play* (1901), in which the products of the unconscious mind are made visible onstage. In the use of this technique, the play can be seen to launch expressionist theater. Other features that would become typical of expressionist theater are the play's episodic structure, poetic imagery, and highly lyrical language (the play even introduces musical notation into the text), and the use of character types – in this case, the Officer, the Lawyer, the Doorkeeper, the Quarantine Master, the Schoolmaster, the Poet, and so on – rather than individualized characters. This last trait reflects the fact that, like Lasker-Schüler's *Die Wupper*, *A Dream Play* portrays the tragedy of human existence rather than the tragedy of a single individual character(s).

When Strindberg's German translator, Emil Schering, expressed consternation upon reading the play, the author wrote him a letter containing a concise explanation of its project:

> How to understand *A Dream Play?*
>
> Indra's daughter has descended to Earth to find out how human beings have it. And there she learns how difficult life is. And the worst is: having to injure or do harm to others if one wants to live. The form is motivated in a preface: the conglomeration out of a dream in which, however, there is a definite logic. Everything *irrational* becomes

> believable. Human beings appear at several points and are sketched, the sketches flow together; the same person splits into several persons only to form into one again.
>
> Time and place do not exist; a minute is equal to many years, etc. (Strindberg 1973: 3)

Since the scope of dreams is cosmic, the sky is literally the limit of the play's purview. It begins in the clouds, the home of Indra and the other gods, from which Indra's daughter descends to earth, the "densest and heaviest / of the spheres wandering in space" (Strindberg 1973: 20). In her search to learn whether the complaints of human beings are justified, the Daughter witnesses or participates in a series of human experiences in synthetic form – the pursuit of knowledge, love, marriage and its difficulties. Settings change without transition and with stunning vividness, moving from a castle crowned with a flower bud to the deathbed of the Officer's mother to the corridor of the opera house, where the Officer has waited for his beloved for seven years, to the Lawyer's office to Fingal's Cave (an actual cave on an island in the Hebrides west of Scotland) to the suffocating apartment where the Daughter lives as the wife of the Lawyer to Foulstrand and Fairhaven. Although the play's cosmic scope would seem to present an enormous challenge to any set designer, Strindberg's stage directions provide for considerable spatial economy, making frequent suggestions about how to adapt one set for use as the next one.

The rich symbolism of the play's dream settings is virtually mythic in its universal resonance. The air hole in the shape of a four-leaf clover in the door at the opera house, for example, can be read as symbolic of the key to the meaning of life – hope – such as that necessary to susrain the Officer in his long wait for his beloved. By contrast, the shawl worn by the doorkeeper is heavy with the agonies of people she has encountered during her 30 years there. Foulstrand and Fairhaven can be read as anxiety dream and wish-fulfillment dream, respectively, the former a place containing quarantine buildings for the sick and a gymnasium "in which people are exercised on machines resembling instruments of torture" (Strindberg 1973: 46) designed to counteract their physical deformities brought on by excessive eating and drinking, the latter a felicitious spot featuring sunshine, children, flowers, singing and dancing, lovers in a sailboat on a beautiful bay, flags on docks, white handkerchiefs of greeting, and a lovely melody in the background. Like many of our dreams, both terrifying and pleasant, Foulstrand and Fairhaven are grotesquely exaggerated, and, significantly, the boundary between them is a thin one; the lovers on the sailboat glide from Fairhaven inexorably to Foulstrand, where they are condemned to a 40-day quarantine.

Just as the seeds of Strindberg's expressionist drama lie in the symbolism of his earlier realist and naturalist plays, *A Dream Play* abounds in realistic elements. To cite a single, telling example: the hairpins which the Lawyer finds on the floor of the apartment he shares with the Daughter are emblematic of the Daughter's slovenliness, which is one of the major causes of his discontent in their marriage. Yet typically for the complex symbolic structure of this play, Strindberg does not leave things at that. Rather, a conversation about hairpins between the Lawyer and the Officer points to another level of significance:

Lawyer: Look at this one. It has two prongs but is one pin! There are two, but it's one! If I straighten it out, there's only one! If I bend it, there are two without ceasing to be one. That means: the two are one! But if I break it – here! Then they're two! Two! (*Breaks the hairpin and throws the pieces away*)

Officer: You've seen all this . . . But before you can break them off, the prongs have to diverge. If they converge, it holds up.

(Strindberg 1973: 46)

It is not difficult to interpret the hairpin in this dialogue as a symbol of romantic partnership. Hence in Strindberg's ingeniously economical rendering the same object symbolizes both marital strife and marital unity, and yet is effective in both functions. Furthermore, insofar as this scene occurs just after the Officer has invited the Daughter to go away with him and immediately before the Lawyer leaves her, it also serves as a symbolic transition from one relationship to the next.

In the end, however, the Daughter is disappointed in this as in every earthly experience in which she takes part, again and again observing that "Human beings are to be pitied": joy has to be paid for doubly with sorrow, life is filled with repetition and tedium, doing good for one person means bringing misery to others. The essence of what she learns about human life – its split nature – is compellingly captured in the last words she speaks before leaving the earth:

> Now I feel all the agony of being,
> that's how it's to be a human being . . .
> One misses even what one has not valued,
> one regrets even what one has not broken . . .
> One wants to leave, and one wants to stay . . .
> So the halves of the heart are torn apart,
> and feelings are torn as between horses
> by contradiction, indecision, disharmony . . .
>
> (Strindberg 1973: 85–6)

The play's consummate symbol of the fundamental duality of existence is the first and last station the Daughter encounters: the castle crowned by a flower bud is, significantly, surrounded by manure and litter from the stables; when the castle catches fire at the play's end, a wall of human faces, "asking, sorrowing, despairing" (Strindberg 1973: 86), is illuminated, yet the flower bud bursts into a gigantic chrysanthemum.

In the wake of Strindberg much of twentieth-century drama is enriched by the presence of figures from dream and fantasy existing onstage alongside realistic characters. Following his expressionistic use of space, reflecting his awareness of the power of the unconscious mind over our daily lives, theater could never be the same again.

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