

SELF AND GENERATIONAL REALITY  
IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA  
(Scholars' Conference)

35<sup>th</sup> William Inge Theater Festival  
William Inge center for the Arts  
Independence Community College  
Independence, Kansas  
April 20-23, 2016

Dr. Howard R. Wolf  
Emeritus Professor and Senior Fellow  
Department of English (SUNY-Buffalo)  
Life Member, Wolfson College (Cam.)

The Spanish philosopher, Ortega Y Gasset provides the intellectual basis, I think, for understanding what elements contribute, **in generational terms**, to a play of enduring appeal and value in his *Man and Crisis*.

In order for a play (as well as other genres) to speak to and for an audience in a particular moment of history, there must be in Ortega's terms a meeting of inner and outer realities : subjective depth and objective facticity (the artifacts of material life, historical events, revolutions, technological advances, methods of torture, and wars).

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) saw deeply into this aspect of our existence and the cosmos when he said in his *Pensees* (1670) that our lives were lived between the mysteries of the "finite" and the "infinite."

On the one hand, the writer as playwright, must try to penetrate and to represent the innermost chambers of our lives. As Ortega says about the “drama” (*Man and Crisis* 33) of our lives:

“The reality of a life, then, consists not in what it is for him who sees it from the outside, but in what it is for him who is within it....Hence, in order to know another life which is not ours, we must try to see it not from within ourselves but from the point of view of the person who lives it” (“Idea Of The Generation,” *Man and Crisis* 32).

The serious playwright refuses to believe that “hell is the other” (Sartre, *No Exit*). In a sense, Sartre’s play itself is a refusal to believe that we can’t have an empathetic relationship with a Chaucerian cast of characters who inhabit our world so that “their” world becomes ours – to some extent.

At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, Ortega says: “The discovery that we are fatally inscribed within a certain group having its own age and style of life is one of the melancholy experiences which...befalls every sensitive man. A generation is an integrated manner of existence...a fashion in living, which fixes itself indelibly on the individual” (*ibid.* 43).

I would suggest that the conflict between and **partial resolution** of these philosophic actualities of our lives will determine if a play speaks to an audience in its own time and to audiences in the future. Those playwrights we most esteem, whose works continue to play on the American and world stage are those that **bridge** the gap between **interior** consciousness and **external** phenomena.

I emphasize “partial resolution.” The extent to which a playwright resolves serious conflicts at a

personal and social level and the technique of the resolution will determine whether a work is comic, melodramatic, sentimental, tragic, trivial, or utopian.

This is not to say that we all possess the same identity and sense of reality; it is to say rather that we each possess a special version of the essentials of Selfhood and communal existence; and each generation provides new terminology to discover and to name what attributes define us as a species in these dual terms.

Shakespeare's plays, at once intensely personal and historical, make the point. What we find most moving, often enough, are the **soliloquies** in which we see and hear characters, usually men, trying to come to terms with their destinies (chosen, uncertain, or fated) within the private chambers of their consciousness that mirror "our" feelings and thoughts.

We identify with the inner life of characters as they struggle to understand and to come to terms with each other from the eloquence of Shakespeare through Brando's "method" mutterings to George and Martha's shared delusion in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

We are most attentive to works of literary art in which the central drama is one in which an "I" in its complexity confronts an aspect of recognizable history (past, present, or future) and one in which "inner" and "outer" mirror each other like the obverse and inverse surfaces of Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.'s chambered nautilus. Each generation provides different "versions" of inner and outer states.

To say that we are watching "recognizable history" does not mean that we are seeing a replica of the history of "our" time; it means rather that we recognize

an historical or political **process or dynamic** with which we have some familiarity.

George Orwell's *1984* as novel or play provides an example of the dramatic interface between personal consciousness and monolithic state authority.

Winston's "diary," his love of old books, and his erotic attraction to Julia resist the Power of the Totalitarian State.

Orwell doesn't need to name this State for us. We have seen its type (archetype) at work throughout history. It seemed in 1949 to apply most obviously to extreme British socialism ("Ingsoc") and the same savage Soviet system that Arthur Koestler had written about in *Darkness at Noon*. But if it had referred only to the persecution of a certain class of people (intellectuals and writers) at a certain moment in the

Soviet Union's brutal history, the novel would not have been as influential over time as it has been.

When Winston begins his diary – “to mark the paper was the decisive act” -- on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1984, he represents everyone who wishes to record and preserve his thoughts and feelings initially as a private act.

In writing a dystopian satire about his 1930's generation -- those who lived, fought, and died for the cause of freedom against Fascism in Spain – Orwell reached back to John Milton as a point of reference (251) and expected us to be reading his book in 2050.

He had to find a form of fiction that would combine the actuality of his own generation with an imagined future of later generations. Like Swift (251), he joined savage realism with a kind of fantasy to write a book of enduring value. He knew, I think, that he

was, in some way, in the company of Shakespeare (251), Ben Jonson's writer "for all time."

**Exempla:** *The Diary of Anne Frank*

There can be no better example of the paradoxical relationship between the "isolated" Self and a distant general audience than Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. And it is very much to the point that Anne Frank's transformational book was written in the most private of literary forms – a diary. Before it occurred to her that anyone might read her words in the future, she wrote in one of her first entries:

"Writing in a diary is a really strange experience for someone like me. Not only because I've never written anything before, but also because it seems to me that later on neither I nor anyone else will be interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl" (5-6).

Her diary reduces and expands the meaning of the Holocaust through the experience of one young writer's observations of daily life in the Secret Annex at a time when every aspect of daily life was imperiled for all European Jews and despised "others."

We might say, putting it in terms of theater, *The Diary* is an extended "soliloquy." As we read Anne Frank's words, knowing that she will not live to read her own book, we grasp the generational tragedy of the Holocaust. We can put ourselves in Anne Frank's position in a way that an abstract portrayal of mass extermination would not make possible.

Anne's individual fate embodies the tragic fate of a generation. Like Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Anne's unique awareness of her experience defines the preciousness of all LIFE in every generation.

This may explain to some degree why **most** of the world's great plays deal with families and why most of them put the spotlight on a main character with whom we can identify: Oedipus, Hamlet, Cyrano, Ernest, Medea (Robinson Jeffers), Citizen Kane, Harvey, Mr. Roberts.

As theatrical convention has moved away from the soliloquy (and "aside"), it has become more difficult for the playwright to enter and to represent the mind of "one" character, but ways have been found, including the innovative use of the stage manager-narrator in Thornton Wilder's enduring *Our Town*.

**Exemplum:** *The Glass Menagerie*

Tennessee Williams recognizes this problem in *The Glass Menagerie* and says in setting the scene: "The narrator is an undisguised convention of the play." Tom introduces an autobiographical element

into the play as well as a biographical one, since he can comment on the action and the state of mind of his mother and sister.

Tom fulfills the other half of my equation by giving the play a social and historical context:

“In Spain there was revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion. In Spain there was Guernica. Here there were disturbance of labor...in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis...(139).

The drama of the plays consists in the interaction of, and collision, between several kinds of internal and external forces at a personal and cultural level.

The use of Brechtian images and legends, ‘Clerk,’ ‘Annunciation,’ enlarges the scope of the play.

Williams writes not only about the thematic aspects of his American generation of the 1930’s in

*Menagerie*, but he is as well a product of his theatrical generation, and, like Arthur Miller in *Salesman*, he makes use of emerging theatrical possibilities in order to revise the form of realism. Tom says in his opening statement, “I give you truth in the pleasant guide of illusion” (139).

And this may explain why the one-person play has fared so well as a sub-genre in post-war American theater from the *Belle of Amherst* through Hal Holbrook’s *Mark Twain* to Tom Dugan’s *Wiesenthal*. Nothing speaks more directly to us than one person speaking to us or us speaking to someone. Dialogue is the essence of drama and what makes love possible. If there is anything we understand in our genocidal era, it is the value of an individual life.

**Exemplum:** *Death of a Salesman*

Although Arthur Miller is essentially a realist, he, too, **like other Modernists of his generation,** expands the genre. The salesman's house is "a dream rising out of reality," and there are two time-zones on the set. The past takes place in one of them, the present in the other. This juxtaposition allows Miller to represent different generations of Willy's consciousness in an efficient and structured way.

We are most aware of Willy's isolation within his family, his neighbors, and the monolithic American dream of "success" (in financial terms) when the specter of Uncle Ben appears during a conversation between Willy and Charlie. During this scene, Willy is engaged in a conversation with the fantasy of his successful brother's return, the effect of which is to define further for Willy his own failure. Ben's

possession of “diamond mines” contrasts with Willy’s struggle to make a living. To the extent that Ben really exists at this point, he exists as a projection of Willy’s interior life. His “solitude,” so unlike Rilke’s and Ortega’s, is one of self-dispossession. His psychological stature is diminished with Charlie’s just as Willy’s “small, fragile-seeming home” is surrounded by “a solid vault of apartment houses.” **Time and space can be conflated for the writer in the Post-Einstein generation.**

The binary oppositions of Ben-Willy, Willy-Charlie, Biff-Happy, Biff-Bernard, the openness of the “Western states” (441)-the enclosure of the city, and success-failure represent some of the generational possibilities that shaped Arthur’s Miller’s dramatic sensibility.

*Death of a Salesman* explores the inner and outer realities of these dualities and the relationship

between them. Willy is a “small” man in a “larger” world that crushes him. His defeat would not move us if we not grasp his inner complexity.

**Exemplum:** *Waiting for Lefty* (Odets)

In a broad, but limited, sense, Clifford Odets 1935 play, *Waiting for Lefty*, illustrates my thesis. At one pole, the theme of self-realization – Flora’s “I gotta right to have something out of life” (17) - is defined in the specific Marxist terms of 1930’s struggle within a union between corrupt bosses and the workers (a precursor, in some ways, of *On the Waterfront*).

At the other, attention is paid to isolation of the individual in a competitive and success-driver society: “In a rich man’s country your true self’s buried deep.” But the generational context is dramatized in “simplistically symbolic terms” (Clurman X) and the depths of Dr. Barnes’s self is not explored in anything

like Rilke's interior terms in his *Letters to a Young Poet*. Odets expands both sides of the equation and dramatizes them with augmented complexity in *Awake and Sing*.

**Exemplum:** *The Dark At The Top Of The Stairs*

If Inge's last major play seemed part of the horse-and-buggy era post-1960's, I would argue that it has a new relevance today. "When Rubin says (*Four Plays* 229), "I was raised on a ranch and thought I'd spend my life on it. Sellin' harness is about all I'm prepared for...as long as there's any harness to sell," he represents a man caught between obsolete and emerging technologies. Every epoch – from the invention of the wheel through the steam engine to robotics and the IT revolution – makes it possible to put a version of "Rubin" on the stage.