

Toward a More Functional Definition of 'Drama' - A Reductionist Appraisal

Mallam Al-Bishak

Abstract

The Western scholars have defined drama from their own perspective. Relying on Aristotle's definition of drama as the 'imitation of man's action' hence a secular affair, they search for it in non-Western cultures, and often conclude that drama does not exist there except a semblance of it. Thus, the more common Western definitions of drama emphasize the superfluous qualities rather than the most basic aspect. This paper examines two of the most common Western definitions of drama against the backdrop of the types of drama commonly practised in the West. Its conclusion betrays the gross inadequacy of the Western definitions of drama, particularly the Aristotelian conception, and proves that, shorn of parochial sentiments, drama abounds in both the Western and non-Western cultures.

This paper adopts the most modern method of dating in the Gregorian calendar. In place of 'Before Christ (BC)' is used 'Before the Common Era (BCE)' and instead of 'After Death of Christ (AD)' is used the 'Common Era (CE)'.

Introduction

- (i) drama is always changing as society is changing – **J. L. Styan**.
- (ii) When the advocates...suggest that traditional African drama hardly exists, they mean that they do not exist in the form of European drama, as if that is the only yardstick for determining what drama is – **Yemi Ogunbiyi**.
- (iii) Certainly their (i.e. the primitive people's) drama meant more to the tribesmen than theatre does to civilized mankind in the twentieth century – **Sheldon Cheney**

Purveying a definite definition of drama is problematic. It is so even from the Western (European) eyes from where the word – not concept or notion of it – originated. This essay attempts a *reductionist* appraisal of drama. It examines two of the most popular definitions of drama by trimming the superfluous aspects of it, and retaining the most basic point that is critical to drama. It further attempts to distinguish drama from theatre despite their inter-relatedness, and makes an excursion into history by tracing the origins and development of drama from the remotest past to the modern times. In addition, it enumerates the fundamental elements of drama, and ends up by projecting the fluidity of drama to indicate that despite being understood differently by different societies, it has a universal thread that runs through it.

What is Drama?

The twin working definitions of drama being used here come first, from *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia*, which says that,

- a) Drama is a 'story put into action, or a story of human life' told by actual representation of persons by persons, with imitation of language, voice, gesture, dress, and accessories or surrounding conditions; the whole produced with reference to truth or probability, and with or without the aid of music, dancing, painting and decoration.

The second definition is by Brian Crow (2 – 3) who says that,

- b) Drama is a 'type of theatrical performance in which the active participants impersonate (that is, pretend to be people, beings

or things other than they really are), and through a usually predetermined sequence of physical actions enact a story for the entertainment of an audience’.

The first lexiconal definition considers the following to be essential to drama:

1. Story-based action;
2. Narration by more than one actor, who imitate language and voice;
3. Use of costume, hence the actors imitate dressing; and
4. Setting, hence the imitation of surrounding conditions.

What it considers to be non-essential are music, dancing, painting and decoration. However, when this definition is examined, and applied to some types of drama, its inadequacies become glaring. For instance, drama must not have more than one actor. This is true of **monodrama** – a one-actor play that may require just an actor that may even act out the roles of multiple actors/ actresses. Seventeenth century French dramatist, Jean Baptiste Poquelin, better known with his stage name, Moliere, was a celebrated monodramatist. Further, physical action may not be essential to drama, as in the case of **closet drama**. It is a written play intended to be recited instead of being acted; if any, its action is mental rather than physical. Also, speech (narration) may not be necessary in drama, as in the case of **dance drama** or **mime drama** or **shadow drama**. **Dance drama** is the enactment of an experience through dance movements, and may not use speech, voice or song. **Mime drama** is an enactment of an episode without speech but achieved through body movements, facial expressions and gestures. **Shadow drama** or **puppetry drama**, which is a play is the manipulation of puppets or the shadows of cut-out figures on paper, displayed on a translucent screen to enact events, and may not use speech. Importantly, it is not an enactment by humans though the puppets or paper figures may imitate humans through their shadows. Costume may not be essential to drama as in **closet drama** or **adult acting**. This extends the boundaries of drama beyond the sight. Drama is therefore to be wholly experienced rather than tangibly seen or physically performed. At any rate, drama is the act itself rather

than what the actor wears or does not wear. Therefore it is still drama even if the actor plays a role naked or without clothes (costume). After all, performers in x-rated movies or pornography call themselves 'adult actors/ actresses'. Setting may also not be essential to drama. By setting is meant the realistic setting where real objects are brought on stage to resemble the human environment such as the home, office, classroom, market, eatery etc. This point must be made to de-emphasize the importance of the proscenium stage or a similar one to achieve verisimilitude. A contrast to it is the empty space used by the Italian itinerant group of actors called *Commedia dell' Arte* (Comedy of Artists) to perform their drama in any place or location such as the marketplace, open field etc, and move on.

The second definition of drama supplied by Brian Crow (2 – 3) considers these elements essential to drama: -

1. A theatrical performance;
2. Impersonation of characters; and
3. Enactment of a story.

The use of 'theatrical performance' is ambiguous. However, if it means a performance inside a theatre building or town hall or assembly hall or auditorium or 'made up' setting etc specially meant for dramatic performance, then it is wrong to consider it essential to drama. As has been shown earlier, drama can be performed outside a building such as the village square, open space, marketplace, etc as in the case of the Italian *Commedia dell' Arte*. Also, the use of 'participants' (characters/ actors) in a plural sense presupposes that drama cannot be performed by a singular person. As has been shown before, **monodrama** is performed by an actor or actress. But then Crow (2) provides a clue to his exact meaning of 'theatre' or 'theatrical' which he explains as "a combination of, among other things, movement, gesture, voice, costume and physical objects in an impressive display". It has already been shown that drama does not require physical movement or gesture or costume or physical objects as in **closet drama**; or voice as in **mime drama**. Crow (3) too insists, and rightly so, that speech is not essential to drama like **dance** or **mime drama** except what he calls 'dialogue plays'.

From the two foregoing definitions, the only essential element to drama is enactment (of a story). Such enactment can be done by a singular or multiple actors inside a building or outside it with or without voice, naked or with clothes (costume) etc. It can then be seen that but for 'enactment', all the other qualities of drama are superfluous. Yet, the Western scholars claim that non-Western cultures have no drama by emphasizing the superfluous aspects of it.

The Difference Between Drama and Theatre

What differentiates drama from theatre? **Drama** derives from a Greek verb 'draein', which means 'to act'. Richard Taylor (102) defines drama as "the observation and judgment of human experience in a satisfying aesthetic composition and the presentation of some particular truth relative to that fictional world." From the foregoing, human experience of some basic truths about life is crucial to drama. Thus, dramaturgy is all about experiencing enactment-based truth.

The word **theatre** originated from the Greek word 'theatron', which means 'a seeing-place' or viewing spot. Seldon Cheney (1) defines it as "a **place** for acting, dancing, dialogue, drama, in the ordered scheme of life"; while Taylor (102) explains it thus:

Good theatre requires action and characters which are, to some extent, **exaggerated, striking and larger than life**.

That is just what is meant when we say that someone has a dramatic personality or that an action is theatrical. In fact, it is not so much the nature or character of actions which makes them dramatic or theatrical, but rather **the treatment employed in presenting them**. (Emphasis added).

From the foregoing, theatre refers to the place of watching a dramatic performance like a building or a 'made up setting' like an open air theatre built like a halved stadium such as the Greek amphitheatre. In that case, theatre management in modern times may do with stage-construction with props, canvass, platform, scenery, decorations, stage-lightings, physical objects, costume, make-up etc. On the other hand, the second definition relates theatre to dramatic performance or skill or talent which is manipulated to enact a story.

In the light of the above explanations, it may be understood why a play can be described as 'having excellent theatre but poor dramaturgy', and vice-versa. By excellent theatre, it may mean very impressive display of skills by the performer(s) along with the stage-construction, stage-lightings, backdrop, costumes, make-up etc. On the other hand, poor dramaturgy may refer to the truths espoused by the play. In other words, theatre refers to the form or style, while drama refers to the ideational content or message.

The Historical Development of Drama

How drama originated is a matter of speculation. Two theories have been offered. The first theory traces drama to ritual dance, which is mimetic in nature by imitating the gods. Places associated with ritual dance include Africa, Asia and Greece especially during traditional festivals. The second theory pins it down on mimicry. Cheney (24) calls it the 'sheer impulse to reproduce, to image, to retell the heroic episode in vivid action'. He believes that mimicry precedes dance and other elements of composite theatre hence it "is one way in which drama occurred in many places and at many times – before the known birth of the theatre in Greece" (Cheney 24 – 25).

Greece is credited with the first dramatic performance or text in Europe since the eighth century before the Common Era (BCE). It evolved from the religious rites held in honour of Dionysus, the god of fertility, at the annual festivals. The festivals contained both the serious and the unserious aspects of life. The serious aspect entailed the chanting of a dithyramb and sacrifice of a goat to Dionysus. Aristotle says that the dithyramb developed into an epic, and graduated to a tragedy (drama) from *tragos* (goat) and *oide* (song). The unserious aspect however, entailed the trading of abuse between bystanders and *komos*, a group of revellers who wore animal dresses, drank alcohol and chanted phallic songs. This experience was transformed into an invective, and later developed into comedy from *komazien* (revel). Homer and Hesiod began a kind of narrative or oral drama in Greece. Archilochus of Paros, a stern critic and poet, introduced satirical humour to oral drama between the eighth and seventh

centuries BCE. Around 536 BCE (6th century), Thespis of Icaria is credited with having introduced acting in Europe hence called the 'Thespian art' by creating an actor in a dialogue with the chorus leader. The actor wore masks and costumes, and impersonated many characters. He also introduced make-up by dabbing the actor's face with paint to make exotic designs. He was the first to combine the literary text with the dramatic performance. Until Thespis, drama had been an oral narrative or dramatic story-telling of familiar events associated with the traditional gods in ancient Greece with the chorus or group of performers making chants at intervals or making gestures to emphasize an episode. But, Thespis's creation of an actor to engage the chorus began to emphasize the independent action of man in relation to the gods probably represented by the chorus. Aeschylus, born a decade after Thespis's innovations, raised the number of actors to two, played down the importance of the chorus, and won a dramatic contest. Fifth century BCE dramatist, Sophocles, increased the number of actors to three, and began a tight acted-spoken drama. From Greece drama travelled to Rome, where Horace, a literary critic, recommended that a play should have five acts. Thus, classical drama flourished, and influenced the Renaissance European drama (1500 – 1660 CE), the Neo-Classical drama (1660 – 1798 CE), modern drama (1798 – 1939 CE) and contemporary drama (1939 CE – date). Today Europe has produced great dramatists such as William Shakespeare, Eugene Ionesco, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht etc. However, if we look at the evolution of drama in Greece and the dramatic works of Hesiod, Homer, Sophocles, Aristophanes etc, we will understand that drama was not purely a secular activity in the sense that the Greek gods were also imitated. Therefore Aristotle's definition of drama as the 'imitation of the action of men' cannot stand. For, even Greek drama was an imitation of the action of the gods and men.

Although Greece started drama in Europe, it had been performed and written in Africa, specifically Egypt around 3000 BCE. Indeed the Egyptian 'Mystery Plays' influenced the Greek Dionysian rituals among others as well as the early Athenian drama (Cheney 34). Among the Egyptian plays is the Abydos Passion Play depicting the agony of Osiris's murder, acted since 2000 BCE. The stele or boat in which

Osiris was killed provides evidence of the world's oldest dramatic performance (Cheney 28). However, today the passion play in Europe relives the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Types of Drama

In addition to tragedy and comedy, ritual drama and history drama are among the four major dramatic classifications. However, drama has petered out into various types. Such types can be found in the compilation of literary terms edited by Joseph T. Shipley and the one compiled by Beckson, Karl and Arthur Ganz. They include in 'alphabetic order' boulevard drama, bourgeois drama, burletta, *capa y espada*, chronicle play, closet drama, *comédie larmoyante*, comedy of humours or character types, comedy of manners or genteel comedy, comedy of intrigue, comedy of common sense, *commedia dell' arte*, *comœdia erudate* and curtain raiser. Among also are domestic tragedy, pure drama, epic theatre, farce, folk drama, heroic drama and high comedy, Interlude and Kabuki. Others include liturgical drama, Living Newspaper, low comedy, masque, melodrama, mime, miracle play, Noh drama, passion play, revenge tragedy, satyr play, school play, sentimental comedy or weepy comedy, Theatre of Cruelty, Theatre of the Absurd, thesis play, tragicomedy, well-made play, ritter drama, monodrama, shadow play, black comedy, antitheatre, total theatre, comic opera, documentary drama, court comedy and cup-and-saucer drama. The rest are Grand Guinol, laughing comedy, problem play, mummer's play, satire, static drama, theatre of the grotesque and theatre of silence. All these forms of drama have their peculiarities, and cannot be adequately covered by any concise definition of drama other than that they are enactments. It means that drama is elastic enough to cover the enactments in Africa, Asia, Europe and the other continents of the world. Like Cheney (12 – 13) has said, "Wherever 'primitive' peoples are found and their customs studied, there is ritual and usually dramatic dance."

Some of the elements of drama include the following, act, action, agon, aside, catharsis, chorus, comic relief, conflict, obligatory scene, parabasis, peripeteia, plot, point of attack, quiproquo, scene, soliloquy,

stichomythia and the unities – unity of time, unity of space and unity of action. Others are *coup de theatre*, denouement, *deus ex machina*, dumb show, exposition, *hamartia*, hubris, dialogue, characters etc. Some of these elements can be found in all the dramatic performances across the world without necessarily claiming them to be particular to a race or continent. Is somebody suggesting that any performance can qualify as drama? No, but whereas current Western drama may fit into the Western definition of it, it may not fit into the definition of it by non-Western societies; and vice-versa. It is therefore pointless trying to clobber one's performance to fit into the Western or foreign concept of drama beyond its being an enactment as done by some African scholars.

Once flexibility is applied to the concept of drama by embracing only its basic tenet as an enactment minus its superfluous elements, as well as shorn of the usually rigid secular perception of it, it becomes easier to appreciate the *genre* in its various forms. Hence, it is understood and practised slightly differently by different societies across the continents of the world. Thus, it can be recognized the American Living Newspaper, the Spanish *capa y espada* (cape and sword drama), the Japanese Noh drama, the French masque or boulevard drama, the German epic theatre, the Asian shadow drama, etc. It is in the same vein that is to be appreciated the African traditional forms of drama. Some of them that abound in Nigeria include the Fulani *soro* drama, the Hausa '*yankamanci* drama, the Yoruba *alarinjo* drama, the Ibibio *ekong* or *offiong* drama etc.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Western scholars and other non-Western commentators need to have a rethink about their rigid adherence to their own perception of drama. They should be flexible enough to allow the non-Western cultures to practise their own notion of drama. That is the only way to allow a cross-fertilization of ideas towards the evolution of a sound, global dramatic meaning.

References

- Beckson, Karl and Arthur Ganz. *Literary Terms: A Dictionary*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975, 250p.
- Crow, Brian. *Studying Drama*. Nigeria: Longman, 1983.
- Ogunbiyi, Yemi. *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Nigeria Magazine. Lagos: Department of Culture, Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, 1981.
- Cheney, Sheldon. *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting and Stagecraft*. 4th ed. London: Vision Press Ltd., 1972.
- Shipley, Joseph T. (ed.). *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970.
- Styan, J. L. *The Dramatic Experience*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1965, 154p.
- Taylor, Richard. *Understanding The Elements of Literature: Its Forms, Techniques and Cultural Conventions*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981.
- The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia Vol. II*, New York: The Century Co., 1902.

Works Consulted Not Cited

- Bowers, Faubian. *Japanese Theatre*. Japan: The Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc. of Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, 1974. 294p.
- Rice, Elmer. *The Living Theatre*. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1959. 306p.
- Nkosi, Lewis. *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature*. London: Longman, 1981. 202p.
- Hochman, Stanley. ed. *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*. 2nd ed. Lisbon: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972.