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AFRICAN THEATRE:

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AFRICAN THEATRE: STUDIES IN THEORY AND CRITICISM



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CHAPTER EIGHT

Perspectives of Plot in Dramatic Construction

Oludolapo Ojediran

Introduction

Many scholars such as T.S. Coleridge defines drama as the willingful suspension of disbelief, Bertolt Brecht sees drama as an avenue of teaching morals rather than entertainment, yet the elements of drama affects how best a writer presents his/her ideas. Drama is a fiction represented through a performance on stage that involves the use of characters. Drama, derived from a Greek word 'dramon' meaning 'to do, to act' is often combined with music and dance within a space. While drama is different from other forms of literature, poetry and prose because it is acted out and meant for stage, the use of so many spectacles to embellish dramatic performances these days have made it universally unique.

In the classical Greek period, there were two main genres of drama which include- Tragedy and Comedy. Years later, other forms such as satire, melodrama, burlesques, farce, slapstick and others came into existence from different countries. Little wonder Aristotle used the classical Greek tragedy as a yardstick to measure dramatic performances. According to Aristotle (1447, pp.38-9), tragedy is a representation of action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude; in language enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to the several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of emotions. Aristotle discusses enriched language as a language possessing rhythm, music or song. Since this work does not deal with tragedy, it is essential to make reference to it because that is the source and origin of criticism.

Aristotle's definition and criticism of tragedy leads to his six elements of drama which include plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song, but this work will be more elaborate to discuss other elements of drama such as theme, action, dialogue, language, amongst other, that have evolved over the years.

Elements of Drama

This will be a brief explanation of the elements of drama as this work's major concern is on plot in drama. Plot as the first element will be discussed last to allow elaborate analysis. While Aristotle defined drama as an imitation of life, he also analyses the six constituents which determines the quality of the play.

Theme

This is the central message that links all aspects of the literary work with one another. The theme of a work can be achieved in one single word such as love, violence, war, hatred, death, etc. This is the subject matter which is the main or central idea in any work of art. Theme in any work is regarded as the deep meaning that the writer wants to pass across to the readers/audiences which could be direct or indirect. For example in *Ijaye* by Wale Ogunyemi, the main theme is conflict, but other sub-themes include betrayal, war, death, envy, sacrifice amongst others which are used to buttress the understanding of the main theme.

Character

Characters in plays are individuals used by the writers to bring out their thoughts. This is done in a pattern of behaviour that identifies a person which could be through what the character says, what the other characters say about him and what the writer wishes the readers/audiences to know. A character is presented as a complex being because he has to present another person's life as if it was his to allow its believability amongst the audience who has different opinions of such characters. Characters are also categorized into different classes such as the protagonist and antagonist, dynamic and static, round and flat, major and minor characters. However, the plot of any play thrives on its characters who bring out the actions intended by the writer. For example in *Everyman* by Anonymous, Everyman as a character starts fearfully and ends up being bold and courageous ready to face death. The anonymous writer uses the actions of Everyman to preach his theme of morality and the Christian account of life with its basic values in order to gain everlasting life in the kingdom of God. Rather than being a mere propaganda play, the playwright uses his dramatic actions and characters to gain and keep the attention of readers/audiences who want to know the resolution of the play.

Language/Diction/Dialogue

These three are other important elements of drama which has to do with the natural presentation, conversation, talk or speeches between two or more actors. According to Aristotle, diction is the perfection of rendition that is clear without being mean. The writer's language should be clear, vivid and meaningful be it verbal or non-verbal. Dialogue reveals the mind of the characters to the audiences/readers as the story unfolds through spoken words by these characters. However, dramatic language should not only be read but be rendered on stage through diction and dialogue for better understanding. While language is the style of writing or speaking or expression in literary works, diction is the choice of words or phrase by the writer to convey his message and dialogue is the conversation in the play which helps the writer to effectively use language and diction among the characters for easy understanding of the readers/audiences.

Action

This is the series of event that constitute the plot on any literary work. It includes what the characters do, say and present. The action of any work of art is presented through the characters which could be through physical action, reported action, mental or psychological action. It should be noted that although Aristotle (1447, p.39) sees plot as the most important of the elements, the ordering of the incidents; for tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness- and happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action. This also shows that action as an element is a viable means of showcasing the writer's intention on stage while it answers some questions; it poses other questions that form the basis of the themes. In Ferguson's view, dramatic action builds through three stages which are

- i. Purpose- awareness of a desire or goal
- ii. Passion- strength of a desire or passion to fulfill a goal
- iii. Perception- the understanding that eventually comes from the struggle.

For example, in Wale Ogunyemi's *Ijaiye*, an action packed work from the beginning to its end explores Ferguson's observation. The play's action starts with Aare Kurunmi's refusal to accept the crowning Adelu as the Alafin of Oyo by the Ibadan people after the death of Atiba (Adelu's father). While Ogunyemi presents personality clash between Ijaiye and Ibadan, Ferguson's analysis of passion, purpose and perception is clearly visible as the action sets in when Oje (Kurunmi's messenger) comes with a message from Oyo. The conversation that goes on annoys Kurunmi the more because while he is trying to protect tradition, others are pulling it down. However, action is seen as a mood creator.

Spectacle

These are the creative spices/devices that stir up the audience during a performance which can be used as a form of comic relief or tragic muse. That is, it may either create a surprise in comedy or arouse emotion such as fear in tragedy. These can also be referred to as condiments in a performance that makes it spectacular for the readers/audience to be more interested in reading or watching a creative work of art because it appeals mostly to emotion. For example in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the major spectacles in the play are created through fighting, confrontations and the appearance of a ghost. It should be noted that spectacle does not necessarily arouse laughter in a performance, but mainly stirs the audiences and create exclamations that add flavours to a performance. Therefore, spectacles are techniques in which dramatic scenes either captivate or shock the readers/audiences unexpectedly.

Plot

The word plot is from a French word 'complot' which means secret skill. Brockett (2004, p. 39) defines plot as merely the summary of a plays incidents, but it also

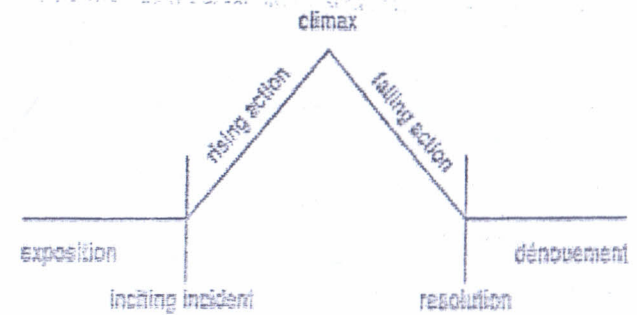
refers to the organization of all the elements into a meaningful pattern. The plot is the overall structure of a play. Plot is a relationship between events in a story or a sequential arrangement of an event in a play. In a dramatic plot, the playwright presents the characters in action, this means that plot in drama develops through what the characters do or say and with their interaction with others. While plot is also described as an intellectual formulation about the relationship existing among incidences of drama, it is also an action moving through conflict to a climax and resolution.

Dramatic plot is expected to produce a result or an effect on the audience no matter the genre of the play. While creating an impression on the audience, it shows that the success of the play depends mainly on the plot which helps the audience to understand the theme of the play. To Aristotle, plot is the most important element of drama which he believes has a beginning, middle and end with the event relating to one another in order for the drama to have a meaning. However, the writer must create a plot that is both credible and believable which the readers/audience find astonishing. In Dasylva (2004, p. 48), he observes that Shakespearean tragic plot is 'organically whole- plot structure' which claims that the tightness of the plot is tenable in so far as cases of comic relief, and other digressional events are considered contributive to the development of the plot or reinforcement of theme. This shows that the use of digression either helps to build or weakens the plot, or the themes of such creative work.

Elements of Plot Structure

While Aristotle views plot structure as having three parts, the Roman drama critic, Horace, advocated a 5-act structure in his *Ars Poetica*. He view that a play should not be more or less than five acts (*Neue minor neu sit quinto production actu fibula*: lines 189-190). Renaissance dramatists used the 8-act structure, but writers like Henrik Ibsen experimented with three to four acts abandoning the five act structure. However, Freytag came up with his five sectioned pyramid which could be used for a five act play. He wrote *Die Technik des Dramas*, a definitive study of the five-act dramatic structure where he analysed his concept of the pyramid. Gustav Freytag (1816-1895) was a German dramatist and novelist who came up with the plot structure of the way stories are told in ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama. Freytag's five parts analysis is very helpful and useful to date. He considers plot as a narrative structure that helps develop the thematic pre-occupation of the writer. He divides the play into five parts:

- i. Exposition
- ii. Rising Action
- iii. Climax
- iv. Falling Action
- v. Resolution



This diagram represents Freytag's plot structure. (Internet source: 19th April, 2015)

Although Freytag's analysis of plot structure was intended for ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama, modern drama can also apply it at its best.

Exposition

This can also be replaced with the word EXODIUM which means an introductory part of drama or any literary work that explains the background of the events that will take place in the story. However, exposition is also the introductory part of a story that introduces all the main characters, that is, the protagonist, antagonist, occasion, the mood, the theme, the setting, amongst many other things. During this expository part, the characters goals and motivations are brought to limelight; how they relate to one another and whom the character is shown. Such expositions arouse the audience/readers curiosity to know more about the protagonist's goals and how such will be achieved. Also, if such goal is unachieved, we get to know what is at stake.

However, the exposition gives information that keeps the readers/audiences interest glued to the playwright's work. Brockett (2004, p.19) observes that exposition in most plays focus on a question, potential conflict or theme. The beginnings of such plays include what may be called an *inciting incident* (p.19), an occurrence that sets the main action in motion and eventually leads directly to a major dramatic question. This is evidenced in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Rotimi introduces the characters and the setting providing descriptive background to the play. A play of two acts and eleven scenes tells the readers/audiences that Lejoka Brown, the main character was once a soldier, expecting the arrival of a third wife (Liza) from abroad where she is studying Medicine. It is clear through Lejoka's words that Liza is unaware of the other two wives. Also, other characters such as Okonkwo (Lejoka's old compatriot's colleague), Mama Rashidat (Lejoka's first wife), Sikira (Lejoka's second wife), and others were introduced during the exposition phase.

Rising Action

This can also mean conflict. The second phase of Freytag's element of dramatic plot structure starts with the conflict(s) which build up until it reaches the climax. This is the middle of a play that consist series of complications that may likely change the dramatic action of a play. Complications in most plays have a beginning (development), middle (climax) and end (resolution). Rising action is the beginning/development of complications. For example, in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, the conflicts and themes are introduced in Act I to Act II whereby Parris and Mrs. Putnam are seen encouraging the belief in witchcraft. The rising action also shows the main character, John Proctor, who is unable to take action due to guilt after engaging in an adulterous act.

Climax

This is considered the high point and most exciting part of a story that makes the reader/audience wants to read more. At this point, the rising action and conflict build up in the story finally gets to its peak which is often the moment of greatest danger or decision making for the protagonist. Thus, it is a stage the main character makes the decision that defines the outcome of the story, creates an identity for him/herself and allows the moral quality created by the playwright to come out. As the third stage of Freytag's five phases of plot structure, it occupies the middle part of the story which is seen as the most crucial point of a play whereby the protagonist clears away the barriers and ready to engage with the adversary (antagonist). The intense point or conflict in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame* is fully explored when King Odewale forces Alaka to explain the proverb made by him that 'the butterfly calls himself a bird' when he invites him to find out the truth about his biological parents and after Baba Fakunle also tells King Odewale that he has killed his father (murderer) and married his mother (bedsharer). There is also the issue of anticlimax which in drama is a non-exciting and disappointing part of a play usually at the end. In the play, this happens at the point where Alaka reveals the true background of King Odewale, Queen Ojuola stabs herself to death and King Odewale plucks out his eyes.

Falling Action

This fourth part of Freytag's phases of plot structure deals with events which occur after the climax. These are usually the after-effects of the climax. This is a phase where characters resolve their problems and differences to move ahead. At this point, the antagonist seems to have won the 'battle' created in the story and it seems evil will triumph. However, the story changes in the next phase as it is true in tragedies and comedies that good will always win over evil. While this may not be immediately clear to the readers/audiences, the question that lingers in their mind is 'what has the protagonist brought upon himself and why is evil overcoming good?' The answers to these questions are created during this phase.

This is obvious in Ahmed Yerima's *Atika's Well* where the family members sees Atika as a good man but at the end, the evil Atika engaged in before his death is said to have led to his death. While the family members think he is killed by someone, waiting for Otibaba to announce their son's killer, it is revealed that Atika sold the river goddess, Ole's, land and eventually killed him.

Resolution

This refers to the end and the conclusion to the falling action of the story. It is a point that releases the dramatic tension and anxiety bottled up by the readers/audiences which is also known as CATHARSIS. This is a stage of the story that reveals the final outcome of the conflict or proffers a solution to the mysteries that the playwright's weaves around the protagonist. It should be noted that some plays do not have a conclusive ending, rather, some stories end with lots of unanswered questions or ends in a stalemate. For example, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* ends in a stalemate whereby some part of the audience wants the robbers killed while some do not because they are the products of a society that failed to plan for its younger generation.

Types of Plot

- Linear Plot
- Episodic Plot
- Cyclical Plot
- Parallel Plot
- Anti-clockwise plot

Linear Plot

This is a plot structure that has a chronological arrangement from the setting and conflict, followed by the rising action to a climax (peak of the action and turning point), and concludes with denouement. This means a plot structure that starts from the beginning, moves through the series of actions/events to a climax and ends up at a loose end. This is also known as Aristotle's plot structure which can be represented. It should be noted that one of the advantages of using linear plot is to enable readers to have an idea of what the next line of event will be, that is readers know that the dramatic piece starts from the beginning and ultimately has an end. For example, in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, a play written in four acts, the plot structure is linear. This is evidenced in each act that moves the plot forward, and the event begins and ends in each act. The play is an exploration of Freytag's phases of plot structure as discussed earlier.

Episodic Plot

The stories and related incidents are loosely knitted through characters, place, theme and actions. This is usually of chapter length and is best used when writers

wish to explore the character's personalities because there is no overall beginning, middle and end to the story as a whole.

Cyclical Plot

This is circular story pattern which begin and end the same way like a cycle. This means that the story ends at the starting point. For example, in Nicholi Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, the actions of the play are cyclical. While Hlestajou, an impoverished young civil servant from Saint Petersburg, is mistaken by members of a small provincial town to be a high ranking government official, the play ends with the introduction of the main government official whom the town is expecting and Hlestajou's fake identity is revealed after receiving generous bribes from the town's people who wants to cover up their corruption.

Parallel Plot

This is a situation whereby the writer weaves two or more dramatic plots that are linked by a common character and similar theme. It is a technique used by Wole Soyinka in *The Lion and the Jewel* whereby the conflict in the story is divided into two halves and will remain parallel until the last minute. The first sub-plot is teacher Lakunle's love proposal to Sidi, while the second is Baale Baroka's love proposal to same woman, Sidi. The two sub-plots are resolved when Sidi's action towards Lakunle shows that Baroka has won her heart while Lakunle is still dreaming of a modern civilized lady whom he wants her to be.

Anti-Clockwise Plot

This is a technique whereby a story is narrated as flashbacks. That is, from denouement, to falling action, to climax, to rising action and to exposition. This is noticeable in Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's novel, *Petals of Blood*.

Plot Devices

Duduyemi (2009, p. 45) sees that these are techniques commonly applied to give illustrations, emphasize opinions and sustain readers' interest. These include the use of flashback, suspense, authorial intrusion, coup-de-theatre and stream of consciousness.

Flashback

This is a part of drama that shows a scene or some scenes that has happened earlier in time than the main story. It is usually said in lines and acted out in the main story, that is, a recall of a previous event for an illustration in the course of narrating a story. For example, a character remembers what has happened in the past and it made part of the play.

Suspense

It is from a Latin word, 'suspendere' meaning 'suspend' commonly used in drama and prose. Suspense is referred to as anticipation mixed with anxiety and tension which is used for delaying the expectation of readers/audiences as to how a course of event would turn out. That is, it sustains their attention to continue reading or watching till the end which is also known as suspending the flow of action.

Authorial Intrusion

This is a stage in the course of narration where the opinion/perspective of the writer is cheaply given out, either directly or indirectly, and intentionally or unintentionally.

Coup-De-Theatre

It is a dramatic plot-device where an action is interplayed to erase a latent manifesting course of hope or worry.

Stream of Consciousness

This is a method used by writers to describe in words the innermost thoughts and feelings of a character. This technique intends to give readers the impression of being inside the mind of the characters which shed more light on the plot.

Conclusion

Drama is seen as an imitation of life, willingful suspension of disbelief and an avenue of teaching morals rather than pure entertainment. In order to achieve these, drama needs a storyline that must have a sequential arrangement of events, messages the writer wants to pass across with his/her style and choice of writing for effective communication through the creation of the characters who carry out the actions of the play. While the paper discusses the definition of drama, elements of drama, more is done on plot in drama which is the first of the elements. However, the paper sees plot as interwoven with all the other elements, that is, without the plot, there can be no story or any dramatic piece.

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CHAPTER NINE

The Importance of Language Communication in Dramatic Performance

Kayode Gboyega Kofoworola

Introduction

Language communication in dramatic performance is crucial to realising the goals of a theatrical performance. However, unlike in other language situations, how it is used to communicate in a dramatic performance is clearly unique and tempered by the very nature of drama as an art form which requires that a story in a drama be communicated to an audience in such a manner that they are able to relate with. That is because dramatic language is a complex multiple inter-communication language. That may be the reason why Aristotle observed that dramatic performance should be done not by words only but by doing-action. The combination of words and action implies the use of body language as other forms of communication in a dramatic performance.

What that implies is that other unforeseeable things such as moods, situation, atmosphere and environment may count by the ways they can influence or affect our dramatic actions. In a dramatic performance, language used may be verbal or vocal and nonverbal as the case may be. However, an effective performance is unrealisable without elements of both forms of language integrated into a performance.

Verbal/Vocal Language

Language in its verbal form may refer to the spoken text which is usually the written script realised in performance. Important to note that while actors would normally relate to language in its spoken form, language can also be simply vocalised by being sung or chanted. Indeed it could also be deliberately presented as gibberish to generate an effect that is over all dramatic.

Vocal Elements

How an actor uses language in the course of performance is largely determined by their voice skills and their capacity to actualise it. There are very key elements to observe and keep in mind when using your voice and vocals during a dramatic or theatrical performance. These include tone, volume, pitch, pace, clarity and accent.

A. Tone

Tone has many meanings, however for the context of our discourse we will define tone as (the quality of a person's voice) the way (manner) of speaking; the way somebody says something as an indicator of what that