

Worksheet Exercise: *Dramatic Worlds*

From: Theater 649 (Dramaturgy) "The world of...", a course taught at San Diego State University by Prof. Anne-Charlotte Harvey

The course was designed to help student dramaturges-in-training to explore the implicit social milieu of six late-nineteenth century plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov: *Ghosts*, *A Doll's House*, *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *Three Sisters*, and *Cherry Orchard*. This assignment was used as an overall guide and aid to independent work on the final project. The final project was a play of the student's own choice by any of these playwrights.

Introduction

Consider the following questions for the world of each play. You may not find an answer, there may not be an answer, but the asking is still important.

Sometimes the play is an independent world, separate from that of the playwright. At other times, the world and immediate environment of the playwright are directly reflected in the play. Recognize also that there are other worlds of the playwright than the immediate one in which he is living while writing the play, any one of which may have prompted him to write the play in the first place. There is, for example, the world of the playwright's past—perhaps a dismal or idealized childhood? A tortured or happy youth? A safe and known world of permanence and known boundaries? There is also the world of the playwright's dreams, wishes, and longings, sometimes concretized in a geographic place or region. (This world or place I call the "site of longing. ")

Since this course is primarily about the world of the three playwrights—Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov—as they assumed it to be and therefore did not spell out for their readers/audiences, the following questions will focus on the actual world portrayed in the play and the world of the playwright at the time of the writing of the play. Note that none of the six core plays is set in a time other than when it was written (*Ghosts* takes place around 1880, *The Father* in the late 1880s, and so on). Likewise, each play is set in a place and space familiar to the playwright using a realist aesthetic, which means that to an unusually high degree aspects of the playwright's own world may have been incorporated into the world created by the play.

In your exploration, investigation, and report on "THE WORLD OF ... ", try to be aware of your own biases. Make your observations like an ethnographer, objectively recording information about the life of a strange tribe. Avoid criticism and irony as well as praise. Take nothing for granted and appreciate the author's use of the location. Make an effort when you encounter something foreign to you to distinguish between what is truly strange, rare, and bizarre, and what would have been a commonplace local tradition or custom.

There is no set length to this exercise. The questions below are intended to get you started, but you can of course add other details and categories to your description.

WHERE (the physical environment):

- Living space--setting (sets): Urban or rural? Upper, middle, lower class milieu? How can you tell? Connectedness to world around? Part of a neighborhood or isolated? Interior or exterior? [Only Chekhov "goes outside." Why does he? It is possible that the other two playwrights "stayed indoors" for a number of reasons, technical and practical ones among them? Technically, exterior scenes were more difficult to achieve on stage in the same realistic mode as interiors at the time when these plays were written, and the plays were all written with performance in mind.]
- One or several sets? What rooms are used by the playwright as scene for the action? Was this choice standard practice in plays of the time, or is playwright innovative?
- What do we see of the room/space on stage? How specifically is it described? Are there pieces of furniture or features of interior decoration mentioned that the playwright expects you to be familiar with? [Is there any such aspect of the set that you, today, are not at all familiar with and may need to research?]
- Is there any vista from the interior to the exterior? What does the playwright want us to see of the outside? Number and size of such openings in the interior walls through which we can see the outside? If there is an exterior view to nature, what is that nature like? Significance? [In a couple of cases, the vista is not of the outside, but of another interior space. This is a different case, maybe leading you to look at the assumed layout of living spaces. The question, however, remains: what does the playwright describe as seen beyond the immediate space? Is it significant?]
- In the room/space itself, are there areas of power or ownership [like "her corner" or "his desk"]?
- Are there objects or arrangements signifying or keeping absent characters present? What influence, if any, does this absent character have on the present action?
- What in the location and space selected for the action may be significant, though at first glance merely "realistic"?

WHEN (the representation of time and the socio-political climate):

- Is climate, time of year, time of day used significantly by the playwright? (e.g. climate, time of year, and time of day in *Ghosts*, time of year and weather in *The Father*, time of day in scene between Nora and Dr. Rank in *A Doll House*, time of year and time of day in *Miss Julie*, time of year in *Hedda Gabler*, time of year and time of day in *Cherry Orchard* [for each act], time of year in *Three Sisters*, etc.)
- Are there special celebrations? What special days of the year are assumed to be important by the playwright? Religious holidays? Festivals? Personal days of commemoration? Does the action include any such special day or days?
- Have there been recent cataclysmic events in the playwright's world? (War, revolution, etc.)
- What is assumed to be the cultural center of the main characters? [It could be a city or a country far away from where the action is set.]

- What innovations (technological, practical improvements, geographical discoveries, exciting "new things", new fads or fashions) are mentioned or shown in the play? How do the characters use or respond to them?
- What are the means of transportation in the play? What are the means of communication in the play? (See below under "HOW" for more details.)
- What new practices or attitudes are mentioned or shown in the action? Is anything (objects, practices, beliefs) described or portrayed as being old-fashioned, passé, boring, deadly, conservative, or destructive?
- What prejudices are shown by the characters? Is any group of people persecuted, looked down on? What seems to be the playwright's attitude?
- Is any change portrayed or implied in the play's action? Has anything changed by the end? Is this change slow or sudden, prepared for or unexpected? Welcomed by the characters?
- Is this an era dominated by acceptance of tradition? Strong belief? Superstition? Scientific inquiry and fact? Is there any doctor or religious leader (pastor) or military man in the play? What point of view does the playwright make them represent?
- Is the governing body of the country of the action conservative or progressive? Who is the leader of that political body? Is his authority questioned by any of the characters? What do we know of the political leanings of the main characters?
- How are the women in the play portrayed with respect to authority and acceptance of the status quo? Do women in the playwright's country have the vote at the time when the play was written? Is the issue of women's emancipation touched on in any way in the play?

WHO (Human beings and characters):

- To what social class(es) do the characters belong? What is the pecking order?
- How old are they? Does the playwright say? How are the servants shown—are they fully developed or stereotypical characters? What is their function in the play's action? [Although servants were taken for granted in most middle class and all upper class households, we can assume that our playwrights do not include servant characters only to create a "realistic" backdrop for the action. What is the function of the two household servants in *A Doll House*? Although often cut in modern productions, they do have a function for Ibsen.]
- How and how well are the characters educated? Any university degrees? How are the women educated? Are any of the women supporting themselves, and if so, what is their profession? Are they working by choice or by necessity?
- Are any ethnic groups or ethnic characteristics mentioned in the play? How are they mentioned?
- Are any of the characters children? What is their role in the world? In the play? Do children have any rights of their own? Are there any abused children? Spoiled children? Children abandoned by their mother or father? Children growing up motherless?
- What is the source of income for the characters? Observations, conclusions?

- Are any of the characters artists or bohemians (outside of conventional society)? Are any students [these are also allowed to be unconventional, at least until they graduate]? What is the playwright's attitude to the characters outside conventional society? Towards doctors, military men, religious leaders?
- What is the attitude toward other countries and nationals of other countries? Has any character traveled abroad, and what was the outcome? What countries/places have been visited? Are any of these places "sites of longing"?

HOW (determinants of character behavior):

- Travel takes place by what means in the play? If there is travel mentioned in the play, how long was the journey, how long did it last, what did it cost, and how was it undertaken (train, boat, carriage, horseback, on foot, etc.)?
- How are communications handled between persons not in the same physical space? How quickly are the characters expecting to reach each other? How expensive is it to communicate (cost of postage, e.g.)? The means of communication dictated many specifics of that communication, e.g., influenced stationery, pens, desks, and so on. What does the playwright take for granted? Does any character use the telephone?
- Favorite foods, diet? What foods are taken for granted in the play? What is its function (comfort food? Indicating poverty? Peasant taste? Refined taste? Extravagance?)? Is the food used to distinguish between characters or groups of characters?
- Dress? What aspects of dress are mentioned, pieces of clothing, accessories? Are they merely taken for granted or indicative of character? What do they indicate or signify, e.g., taste, wealth, extravagance, wastefulness, vanity, or striving for acceptance?
- What forms of entertainment are represented or mentioned? Leisure activities? What amusements are mentioned? Which ones are safe and approved (conservative, and which ones are risqué)? Which ones may be only for men? Are any of these amusements approved by society but frowned on by the playwright?
- Are there any role reversals or disguises? Is any woman behaving like a man in speech, behavior, or pastimes? Why? Is any woman indulging in shocking behavior? Is it done knowingly, on purpose?
- What addictions are described or portrayed? Is the playwright merely describing a contemporary practice or does he have an attitude to the practice/habit?
- What is the assumed attitude toward sex? [We know that the playwright's attitude toward showing it on stage was firmly negative, that it was barely referred to and always obliquely—and even that was objectionable to their critics and audiences.] Is guilt or anger over a sexual relation (outside marriage) a driving force in any of the plays? Who, if anyone, may indulge in premarital or extramarital sex?
- Related to sex are the then taboo subjects of illegitimacy and venereal disease (syphilis, as the worst and most theatrically colorful one). Are any of the characters illegitimate? Does any character have syphilis? What is the playwright's attitude? Why does the playwright create a character that is illegitimate or has syphilis?

- Other taboo subjects of the time?
- What was the state of communications media at the time, and the spread of ideas? How did people get new ideas? Do any of the plays describe this process? Where did you get impulses for new fashions, interior decoration, ideas about housekeeping, travel, religion, new machines, etc.? Any reference in the plays?