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PREVIEW

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**Contemporary poetics and dramatic theory: Structuralist and
post-structuralist approaches**

Brown, Larry Avis, Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1989

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PREVIEW

CONTEMPORARY POETICS AND DRAMATIC THEORY: STRUCTURALIST
AND POST-STRUCTURALIST APPROACHES

by

Larry Avis Brown

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CONTEMPORARY POETICS AND DRAMATIC THEORY: STRUCTURALIST AND POST-STRUCTURALIST APPROACHES

Larry Avis Brown, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1989

Adviser: Tice L. Miller

With the advent of post-structuralism in literary criticism has come an interest in reception theories of literature and the role of the receiver in the production of aesthetic meaning. No longer is the reader of a novel, the spectator of a film or theatrical performance considered a passive recipient of an author's work. The model of artistic communication proposed a decade ago by Wolfgang Iser, Jonathan Culler, and Stanley Fish defines meaning as the product of interaction between a text (i.e., a set of verbal/visual symbols) and a receiver intent on interpreting these symbols. Traditional elements of narrative such as plot and character are viewed not as autonomous structural properties of a text but as interpretive conventions shared by members of the reading community. Contemporary poetics seeks to explain the cognitive procedures whereby a perceiver processes textual information in order to reconstruct the fictional world of the story.

Until recently, research in the field of poetics has concentrated on the nature of narrated fiction such as the novel or short story with some corresponding studies in film theory, but little has been done to apply these concepts to the dramatic

medium. The present study attempts to correct this oversight by proposing the outlines of a systematic theory of drama based on the insights of semiotics, narratology, and reader-response criticism. Chapter one defines the goals of contemporary poetics and suggests ways to reconcile structuralist and post-structuralist approaches. Chapter two surveys five positions within the current debate over hermeneutics and presents the philosophical assumptions of the communication model used in this study. Chapters three, four, and five examine the basic elements of all stories—plot, character, and fictional world—while chapter six discusses the methods by which this narrative information is uniquely shaped by the dramatic medium. Chapters seven and eight offer a synthesis of reading theories and a critique of the most radical forms of post-structuralism.

PREVIEW

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I. INTRODUCTION TO POETICS

A corrupt eleventh-century manuscript of an incomplete set of lecture notes originating some 300 years before Christ has come to be revered as the cornerstone of literary theory in Western civilization. Aristotle's *Poetics*, the earliest extant major treatise on tragic and epic literature, continues to influence discussions of theater and drama, the novel and other fine arts with its seminal concepts of mimesis, catharsis, action, plot and character. Yet, throughout its long history as an honored text, seldom has the *Poetics* escaped serious distortion caused by the critical presuppositions of its interpreters. The misreadings of the neoclassical commentators are notorious. Based on their prior allegiance to Horatian criticism, they transformed Aristotle's description of tragedy in his day into a rulebook for all time, and turned his aesthetic philosophy into a rhetoric of moral effects in keeping with their own cultural standards. Although the *Poetics* received a significant amount of critical attention during this period, "the result was one of the strangest misunderstandings of a basic text in the history of ideas" (Weinberg 200), and the spirit of Aristotle's investigations was lost in the confusion.

What neoclassicism failed to grasp was the philosophic method of inquiry behind the particular details of the *Poetics* that guided Aristotle to his conclusions. Rather than first positing an ideal form of drama as his mentor Plato might have done, Aristotle chose to derive dramatic principles from an examination of literary forms and conventions already in existence. He observed the characteristics of the plays which in his opinion represented the best of his cultural heritage, and developed a logical theory of literature supported by the example of actual works. However, his successors in the area

of literary theory--Robortello, Minturno, and Scaliger in Italy, Chapelain and D'Aubignac in France, among others--in effect did the reverse. Treating his observations as eternal mandates, they used his theory (or rather their interpretation of it) as a Procrustean bed on which they forced Renaissance literature to fit, without questioning whether the standards of another age were appropriate for their own. By viewing Aristotle's hierarchy of critical concerns as a set of final solutions instead of a point of departure, literary critics prior to this century hindered the development of poetics as a systematic theory of literature encompassing both ancient and modern works.

A new poetics. A return to a descriptive, systematic approach to poetics is what Northrop Frye called for in order to restore literary criticism to its place as a proper intellectual discipline (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957). The theory of literature may never rest on past achievements; it must advance as literature itself continues to develop and change. The questions Aristotle raised and the answers he gave helped to shape our understanding of Greek tragedy (Sophoclean tragedy in particular), but his categories do not--nor were they intended to--address many of the phenomena found in works of other periods: for instance in modern drama, the mixing of epic and dramatic modes, the perceptual distortion of expressionism, the influence of directorial interpretation. Because of its Sophoclean bias, Aristotle's definition of tragedy as the consequence of moral action does not adequately describe even the plays of other tragic writers such as Euripides (cf. Kitto's discussion of *Medea*, 196-210). Citing its limitations in no way denigrates the extraordinary achievements of the original *Poetics*, but we do disservice to the spirit of Aristotle's explorations if, being satisfied with his results, we do not continue to test and adapt them to new situations.

Contemporary drama with all its innovations demands a contemporary poetics explained in terms of modern categories. Since the growth of French structuralism in the late 1950s and the rediscovery of efforts in the 1920s by the Russian Formalists, the academic world has shown a renewed interest in the study of poetics, not by producing new commentaries on Aristotle but by pursuing lines of thought similar to his original questions: What are the component parts of a literary piece and how do they work together as a unit? How does an author manipulate his medium in order to produce an intended effect on his readers/audience? What is the relationship between the fictional world created by the author and the "real" world perceived by the senses? Although Aristotle laid the groundwork for these problems, recent developments in the areas of cognitive science and logical semantics as well as the philosophical approaches of structuralism and phenomenology have sharply redefined the basic issues. For instance, one can no longer assume the existence of an artistic work apart from the mind of the receiver. Our understanding of how the human mind processes information has increased rapidly in the last several years, offering novel approaches to audience-based theories of reception.

In addition to new methods of inquiry, the object of study has changed considerably since the time of Aristotle. New literary forms have arisen to challenge some of his primary definitions (would he call Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu* an imitation of an action?), and visionary writers such as Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud have elevated the place of performance far above its lowly status in the *Poetics*. The time has come to suggest new answers to these critical problems, and men such as Gerard Genette, Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler, and Wolfgang Iser have taken up the task. Recognizing their

debt to Aristotle's initial proposals without slavishly holding to his conclusions, twentieth-century theorists are attempting to advance the formal investigation of the arts with reference to contemporary literature and current modes of thought, producing a rebirth of the discipline of poetics after a hiatus of two thousand years (Culler's forward to Todorov, *Poetics of Prose* 7; Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics* xxvi; Chatman 9).

The purpose of contemporary poetics should not be confused with that of literary criticism. Whereas criticism seeks to interpret the meaning of individual works, poetics studies literature in general as a system of meaningful codes and conventions, asking not "what does this text mean?" but "how does it mean?" Jonathan Culler in his *Structuralist Poetics* writes,

The type of literary study which structuralism helps one to envisage would not be primarily interpretive; it would not offer a method which, when applied to literary works, produced new and hitherto unexpected meanings. Rather than a criticism which discovers and assigns meanings, it would be a poetics which strives to define the conditions of meaning. (viii)

As Todorov explains the distinction, poetics is concerned not with literature per se but "literariness," the underlying principles, abstracted from their particular manifestations, that make it possible to communicate ideas, feelings, and experiences by means of aesthetic expression (*Poetics of Prose* 33).

However, poetics cannot ignore specific texts altogether. When removed from its proper object of study, theory becomes narcissistic, preoccupied with itself. To avoid this unproductive tendency, Todorov suggests we see poetics as a synthesis of theory and criticism which seeks to

discover general literary principles within the study of literature itself. In this way poetics does not preclude but actually depends upon interpretive criticism while remaining distinct from it: "Interpretation both precedes and follows poetics" (*Introduction* 7). In his *Narrative Discourse* Genette provides an excellent example of this method as he develops his theory from a detailed analysis of Proust's *Remembrances of Things Past*, which in turn lends support to the theory and its terms. Both theory and criticism are of secondary importance to literature itself but have equal standing with each other.

Although terms such as rules, laws, codes and conventions frequently appear in theoretical discourse, the new poetics is not an attempt to impose prescriptive restrictions on what authors can or ought to write, limiting their possibilities to a predetermined model; nor does poetics want to establish a critical hierarchy with which to evaluate different works or styles. As its ideal, contemporary poetics aims at objective description of all possible genres, forms, and styles, leaving questions of value to the philosophy of aesthetics and the judgment of history. Critics may disagree over the lasting merit of a play, but they must first have the conceptual terminology to describe it adequately before they can discuss its qualities. Besides, "proper" form never guarantees artistic effectiveness. According to Todorov, "There exists no literary method whose use obligatorily produces an aesthetic experience" (*Introduction* 68). A theory may demonstrate similarities in the plot structure of a great tragedy and a hackneyed melodrama without offering the means to distinguish them on aesthetic grounds. Evaluative questions are not unimportant but belong to a different discipline than poetics. The goal of modern poetics is to envision a comprehensive system of theories capable of encompassing the broadest range of artistic forms possible. As artists continue

to break old conventions and create new ones, these theories must expand or adapt to include such innovations without prejudging them by outmoded standards.

Objectives. The purpose of the present study is to formulate the outlines of a systematic theory of drama based on the achievements of structuralist and post-structuralist studies during the past twenty-five years. The field of dramatic theory needs the clarity, objectivity, and logical procedure of contemporary poetics for several reasons. Most dramatic scholarship falls under the category of criticism or history rather than theory. A survey of major drama journals (*Modern Drama*, *Theatre Journal*, *Drama Review*, *Yale Theatre*) during the last twenty years reveals that less than thirty articles (1.1% of those checked) were directly concerned with theory. Books on the subject such as J. L. Styan's *Elements of Drama* (1960) or more recently Richard Hornby's *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* (1986) may propose to discuss how drama communicates ideas and emotions but end up presenting another set of subjective critiques about specific plays.

Among the most gifted critical thinkers there seems to be no concerted effort toward a systematic analysis of drama. Francis Fergusson, Eric Bentley, Jan Kott, Robert Brustein, all offer stimulating discussions of modern drama and radical interpretations of the classics, but their insights remain scattered and unconnected to the work of others. Original attempts at holistic theories--those of Brecht and Artaud, for example--present brilliant defenses of their own idiosyncratic approaches but without the scope of a truly comprehensive poetics which includes other forms of drama. For further evidence of the haphazard status of dramatic theory today, one need only read Marvin Carlson's *Theories of the Theatre* (1985), a thorough but disappointing book

which surveys countless individual opinions without a hint of summary or synthesis to guide the reader through this maze of diverse ideas.

Previous efforts to apply structuralist methods to dramatic theory have fallen short of their goals. Paul Levitt's *A Structuralist Approach to the Analysis of Drama* (1971) defines structure as "the place, relation, and function of scenes in episodes and in the whole play" (16) and takes the traditional French scene as the basic building block of drama. His development of this thesis, however, is far too brief and limited to topics which reveal an antiquated dependence on William Archer's description of the well-made play: the implications of an early or late point of attack, the symbolic use of stage properties, the principles of good continuation (all expectations are fulfilled) and closure (all loose ends are tied up). Richard Hornby's *Script into Performance: A Structuralist View of Play Production* (1977) shows more influence of current theory, but he spends too much time discussing the background and history of structuralism and not enough developing the descriptive, holistic theory of drama he espouses. His emphasis on practical implications for directors also limits the scope of his theory.

As an academic discipline, dramatic theory can benefit from an exchange of ideas with other fields of study moving toward a poetics of contemporary literature. Besides providing the necessary philosophical groundwork for a new poetics, structuralist and post-structuralist research prepares for its own development as a system of thought by mapping out specific areas for further investigation. These disciplines are still in their infancy and make no claims to have arrived at any definitive conclusions yet.

Dramatic theorists should contribute their ideas to the growing set of definitions and concepts concerned with both old and new literary forms.

The major drawback to this approach is that most of the recent theory focuses its attention on narrated fiction such as the novel or short story. Thus, contemporary poetics spends much of its time analyzing styles of narration, free indirect speech, and other aspects of prose literature not found in drama. Some work has appeared in the area of theater semiotics, the study of signs (cf. Elam, Esslin, and the special issue of *Poetics Today*, Spring 1981), but little has been written from this new perspective about the larger structural components of drama such as plot and character. This situation poses certain problems of terminology which must be addressed before we can apply the results of contemporary poetics to the study of theater and drama.

Narratology and drama. Ever since Plato made the distinction between diegesis and mimesis (*Republic* 394c), literary theorists have considered narration and dramatization as antithetical modes of representation: the former implies telling a story through the perspective of a narrator, while the latter implies showing a story through the actions of the characters themselves. Thus, the theory of narrated fiction may appear to have little to contribute to the poetics of drama. However, a novel and a play share a common goal in communicating a story to an audience; both works, although different modes of expression, convey similar content about a fictional world and its inhabitants. For this reason, Segre finds that both narratology and dramatic theory exhibit similar concerns in their analysis of plot and character, the basic elements of story (40). Stories have universal properties which are independent of the media by which they are presented. As a result, contemporary theorists use "narrative" in an inclusive sense to refer to all

forms of storytelling: drama, film, ballet, epic tapestry murals, comic strips, program music ("Peter and the Wolf") as well as novels and short stories are all described as narrative arts in that they are temporal media relating information about characters involved in a series of incidents (Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* 58; Chatman 9). In current parlance, "narrative" does not necessarily imply narration or being narrated, but is frequently used as a synonym for story (Bordwell xi; Pavel, *Poetics of Plot* 15).

The fundamental tenet of narratology (a term coined by Todorov to signify the structuralist theory of narrative) is that the story, a series of fictional events involving agents in a possible world, may be isolated as an autonomous level of meaning and analyzed apart from its text, the symbolic form of expression through which the story is communicated to an audience, be it novel, film, dance, or theatrical performance. The Russian Formalists first identified *fabula* and *sjuzhet* as separate theoretical concerns, distinguishing "the [fictional] action itself" from "how the reader learns of the action" through the artistic text (Tomashevsky 67). Genette makes a similar distinction between *histoire*, the narrative content, and *recit*, the narrative text (*Narrative Discourse* 27). Chatman uses "story" to designate the events and agents of the fictional world, and "discourse" for the particular textual manifestation of the story as presented to receivers (note that "text" and "discourse" are not limited to literary scripts but encompass any medium of artistic expression; 9). In other words, a play (either as written script or performance) consists of a series of verbal and nonverbal symbols, collectively called the text or discourse. By deciphering these symbols, the reader/spectator recreates in his imagination the fictional world of the story which the symbols were meant to convey.

Tomashevsky distinguished discourse from story by the way in which the narrative text reveals the story events in non-chronological order, using delayed exposition, flashbacks, and other devices. Later researchers have treated discourse more broadly to include all aspects of the storytelling process, including the possible modes (diegetic/narrated, dramatic, cinematic, illustrated, etc.) as well as the formal techniques specific to each medium which affect our reconstruction of the story itself (Prince, *Dictionary* 21). In a novel the reader must envision the story through the perspective of the narrator, taking into account questions of omniscience, reliability, and personal involvement in the story. At a play we observe the actions of the characters directly, but still we must make inferences about the fictional world based on what scenes the author chooses to put on-stage and to what degree we can believe the characters' descriptions of past or off-stage events. As Rimmon-Kenan points out, the story is an abstraction, a mental construct of the fictional world which we recreate from information in the discourse (3). Only in theory does a story exist outside a specific textual manifestation.

Some theorists question the validity of this dual-level model of narrative precisely because a story cannot be conceived of as an independent phenomenon. Smith argues that any synopsis which a critic might produce as the base story of several different versions is merely another version, not the story itself (212). For Stanley Fish, who defines meaning as the experience of reading, any change in the discourse alters the way in which we read the story, thereby changing its meaning: "It is impossible to mean the same thing in two (or more) different ways" (*Is There a Text?* 32). On this point, Todorov agrees: "There do not exist two utterances of identical meaning if their articulation has followed a different course" (trans. in Rimmon-Kenan 8).

With these objections in mind, narratologists must be careful not to give the impression that the goal of reading consists of extracting story from discourse after which the latter is discarded as unimportant. Quite often an author's finest achievements are measured by his unique treatment of an insignificant or well-worn story. A comprehensive theory of poetics should examine the effects that alternate discourses have on our reconstruction of the fictional world: for instance, the differences in film and stage versions of the same story. To make such comparisons, however, requires some level of common content among the various texts; as such, story remains a necessary, if elusive, concept in discussions of narrative theory.

Even though story exists only as an abstraction, it should not be thought of as "raw, undifferentiated material" or substance without form. A story consists of a series of events whose internal relations provide it with an inherent structure apart from the formal organization of the discourse (Rimmon-Kenan 6; Chatman 20). We assume that events in the story occur chronologically and in some causal progression. In a memory play such as *Death of a Salesman*, we recognize that in the discourse (i.e., the play as we have it), the scenes of Willy Loman's life have been shuffled out of order, so that we must mentally project these memory segments back into their original sequence in the story. In order not to confuse the unique structural arrangement of the events in the story with how these same events are distributed in the discourse, I have chosen not to follow the English version of Tomashevsky's article which translates *fabula* and *sjuzhet* as story and plot. Instead, I reserve plot to refer to the ordering of the events in the story (cf. Brooks 326; *Dictionary of Narratology* 71). This definition corresponds with that of Scholes and Kellogg who describe story as having a plot: "Story is

a general term for character and action," while plot is "a more specific term intended to refer to action alone" (208). Both plot and discourse as separate theoretical concepts are needed to clarify Tomashevsky's differentiation between the order of events in the *fabula* (story) and in the *sjuzhet* (discourse).

The distinction which narratology makes between story and discourse does not coincide with previous definitions of story and plot offered by Golden and Hardison, Aristotelian critics of a generation ago (cf. their commentary on the *Poetics*, 123). In narratology, story refers not to the raw source material of legends and traditions from which the playwright makes a "plot," but to the play's fictional content abstracted from the specific symbols and textual form by which this content is transmitted. Plot refers to the abstracted, chronological sequence of events, character to the images of human agency who perform these events, both of which exist theoretically at the level of story and which can be discussed apart from considerations of discourse, i.e., how the story is presented. In other words, Sophocles borrowed elements from ancient myths and legends (which were themselves stories with plots, i.e., a definite sequence of events) to create his own story about Oedipus, which he conveyed through a dramatic text. He could have portrayed the same story with the same plot and characters as an epic poem or a mimed dance. He also could have written a play in which blind Oedipus, asked by a stranger how all these things occurred, relates his sorry tale as a flashback, starting with the plague in Thebes. Notice that in this version the original sequence of events (the plot) as it occurred in the fictional world remains unchanged, only our hypothetical author has manipulated the order of events as they are presented to us in the discourse. Undeniably, such

changes would alter the effect of the play but not the information about the fictional world.

By delineating story from discourse, narratology clarifies the crucial distinction between information about the fictional world and the creative act of relating this information in an interesting manner, that is, between the story and the telling of the story. In a novel it is relatively obvious that our impression of the incidents is shaped by the narrator's perspective, how he tells the story, but in a play the illusion of seeing the action without mediation may cause us to overlook the deliberate choices which the playwright has made to "tell" his story in this particular way: which scenes to place on-stage, whether to relate exposition all at once or scattered throughout, whether or not to follow chronological order. Perhaps this dimension of playwriting is what Aristotle meant by "the arrangement of the incidents," but if so, we still must distinguish between the temporal/causal relations of events as the characters experienced them (the plot of the story) and the results of selecting, arranging, and proportioning these events as they will appear to spectators of the play. The concepts of plot and discourse have become confused, partly because Aristotelian terminology finds its illustrations in Greek tragedy in which temporal displacement of story events did not occur: in *Oedipus*, the order of incidents in the plot and in the discourse are identical. In many modern plays, however, this is not the case. Therefore, delineating between story, plot, and discourse is essential for an understanding of contemporary forms of literature.

Reading theory and drama. For the most part, narratology remains a subdiscipline of structuralism, confident in its claim as a descriptive, objective approach to literature. Out of post-structuralist studies has come another

school of criticism which questions the possibility of autonomous textual meaning, shifting the focus from narrative structures within the text to the reconstructing of intersubjective patterns of meaning by the reader. This reader-response criticism offers valuable insights for a theory of drama which seeks to explain not only the generation of meaning but also the communication of that meaning to an audience.

As in narratology, reader-response criticism uses terminology which at first may seem inappropriate to dramatic theory. Even when considered as literature, a play should be understood as a composition intended for theatrical production. Yet, reading implies a literary-critical approach which ignores the performance dimension of drama. We must realize that, instead of this narrow definition, theorists such as Iser, Fish, Beaugrande, and Tan use reading as a generic term to signify the cognitive activity of perceiving and processing sensory information. One may read a theatrical performance or a film using mental processes similar to those used in reading a book: identifying familiar patterns, fitting incoming information into these patterns, recognizing gaps and forming hypotheses to fill them, gradually moving toward a sense of the work as a whole.

Reading in this sense involves more than interpreting words and sentences. It requires an imaginative evocation of the world of the story, an evaluation of what these symbols are meant to be about. This "about-ness," according to Michael Kirby, is the chief quality of referential or literary theater. Referential theater means something, has something to say *about* the world and life. To this approach, Kirby contrasts a formalist, nonreferential theater which is *about* nothing but presents abstract form and movement without content. Referential theater, which encompasses most of the

Western dramatic tradition, is based on the model of communication in which a sender (playwright) transmits meaning through a channel (theater) to the receiver (audience). The receiver decodes the message (the actual symbols of the text/performance) to obtain the intended meaning. Kirby prefers the dichotomy referential/nonreferential to literary/nonliterary, but if the latter is used, he insists that literary theater signifies more than performance based on a dramatic script. An improvisation repeated numerous times might eventually be transcribed into a text, but this deed would not turn a nonliterary event into a literary one. As he uses it, literary theater refers to theater processed or read as a form of intentional communication. By this definition, an improvisation or even a nonverbal mime may be literary theater.

Five characteristics describe this process of reading theater. The basic mental action in reading is the interpretation of signs. A sign is a conventional symbol which stands for something else. We understand a word or a gesture to represent an idea or emotion. Reading also requires discovering the relation of a sign to other signs around it, a phenomenon called syntax. In reading theater, we determine the significance of a line or event by its context, and we attempt to add up a string of events to comprehend the ultimate meaning of the play. In nonliterary theater (Robert Wilson's *Theater of Images*, for example), the individual stage pictures may add up to nothing but simply exist for our contemplation. A third aspect of reading is that it proceeds in a directed, orderly manner. In our culture we read from left to right, line by line. Theater which is literary-oriented controls the attention of the spectator, causing focus to shift from one theatrical sign to another in a purposeful, nonrandom sequence (contrast the multifocality of