

A GUIDE

To The

STUDY OF COMEDY

Felly Ene

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ii

Preface

This work is intended to provide a guide on the general principles of studying drama texts especially comedy. Students and teachers, who are the intended audience of this work who may have problems comprehend the mechanisms involved in scripting the drama pieces. To some, it is the novelty and uncommonness of converting all the actions that took place in the work. To others, the fascination is with the creativity and unity, alongside other literary devices which run through most drama texts till the end.

Whatever the reason, students need to be taught how to appreciate the distinctiveness of the art and be tutored to effectively appreciate its essence.

This book comes to address this issue. Using some selected texts, it takes the reader on the much intended voyage of discovery on drama. It successfully demystifies and educates students on the mastery of the art.

iii

Especially with regards to the specific texts treated, the book provides an invaluable exposition, making it a must-read for all students especially those interested in understanding the drama texts.

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1. General Notes on studying Drama	1
Chapter 2. Dramatic techniques.....	5
Chapter 3. Societal Basis for Comedy.....	15
Chapter 4. Theories of Comedy.....	22
Chapter 5. Comedy and the Neo Classical Period	28
Chapter 6. Tartuffe by Moliere.....	36
Chapter 7. The Lion and the Jewel by Wole Soyinka.....	48
Chapter 8. The Marriage of Anansewa by Efua Sutherland.....	68
Chapter 9. The Trials of Brother Jero by Wole Soyinka.....	110
Chapter 10. Bye to Love by Felly Ene.....	138
General Questions	145
References	147

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL NOTES ON STUDYING A DRAMA TEXT

A drama tells a story that is meant to be acted. It should be interesting to read and attention arresting when acted. There is need to read and re-read the text so as to note salient points as well as details. Notes should be taken but should not be too detailed. Important quotations should be incorporated in the summary. The summary note should be handy for revision purposes and it will help to keep the essentials of the story and get them to become conversant in your mind.

The summary should include but not be limited to the following:

- Details of the main story.
- The development pattern of the story.
- The major and minor themes.
- The elements of the sub-plot if any
- The names and attitudes of the main characters.
- The time and geographical settings and any observed unities
- The stage directions and their relevance to the

development of the text.

The exposition, conflict, complication, climax and resolution of the play.

Drama has two major types namely --- Tragedy and Comedy. There are other sub types found in between such as: tragi-comedy, farce, satire.

There are some important points in the study of drama texts. To start with, attention should be devoted to some major and important characters.

- a) When a character first appears or is first mentioned.
- b) How he is introduced or introduces himself/herself.
- c) What he wears. This may give an indication of his/her character.
- d) What he/she says.
- e) What he/she thinks. This may appear as a soliloquy and the thoughts are revealed
- f) His/Her physical features: very beautiful or ugly, whole or deformed
- g) How he/she acts especially under circumstances such as anger, danger, and extreme emotions.
- h) What others characters say about him/her.
- i) What the author or commentator says about

him/her.

- j) What he/she represents like class, theme, trait, status
- k) How a character changes.

- l) Watch out. A character's name may be symbolic, laden with meaning or it may be connected with the central theme or the personality of the character.

Tragedy and Comedy

Drama may be defined as a presentation in which actors imitate or create for spectators, actions by gestures and or words. If the imitation is done through gestures alone, it is a pantomime or dumb show. There are two main forms of drama in Europe and America, namely tragedy and comedy. Our emphasis here is discussing only the European ideas of drama. Africans and Asians have their own types. Tragedy and Comedy can be compared.

For tragedy, the subject matter is always of high importance while for comedy the subject matter is of minor importance.

Events end sadly in tragedy. Events end happily in comedy control whereas in comedy the hero/heroine

is successful and triumphs over his/her enemies.

Tragedy is serious, sad and pessimistic. Comedy is marked by humour and optimism.

The main characters are usually kings or very important people in a tragedy. In comedy, the characters are usually ordinary and sometimes ridiculous people.

Tragedy and comedy may acquire unique characteristics in different places and times.

Thus there may be disaster in comedy. Whatever happens, comedy always ends more happily than tragedy.

CHAPTER TWO

Dramatic Techniques and Comic Elements in Drama:

You probably have watched a couple of plays, whether comedies or tragedies. The feeling of 'flush' at the end gives a release of 'emotion' at the end. The sense of amusement, even when watching tragedies makes drama essentially an instrument for entertainment. This sense of entertainment is achieved by the numerous elements which make drama excite us to laughter even if the subject matter is serious or grave. Those elements in drama that make us laugh are said to be comic. They include the use of costumes, make-ups, mimicry and the type of and the way that language is used by different characters.

Language is central to the comic quality of drama. It can be used in such a way as to show wit, or humour. It can also be used in a way that is apparently incongruous. Some characters are basically comic in their appearances, speech patterns and actions. The actions of some characters can create some special appeal to our emotions or become interludes which serve as relief from the tensions in tragedies.

Some of these comic elements in drama are wit, humour, incongruity and comic character.

Though drama may occur without speech, there are by far, more fulfillments when speech reinforces the action of the actors and actresses. Such actions are made even more outstanding if the words in the speech are used in such a way as also brings out humour and incongruity. At times, actions and even the costumes can bring out humour and incongruity. Wit, humour and incongruity are essential qualities of drama. They excite laughter and help reinforce the message intended in the drama. Let us consider each of these elements and see how it is used to create comic effects in drama.

Wit: Wit in drama means the ability to say things that are both clever and amusing. What is said has to be concise and creative. It should also be sensible and philosophical. A witty statement requires some form of mental rigour to decode. Take for instance these statements.

The Messenger (in Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra)

The nature of bad news infects the teller. The wit in this statement is that it is short, crisp and deep in meaning. It creates laughter because we imagine bad news infecting the teller like a disease. The truth is that the effect of bad news affects the person that brings it just as it affects those that hear it. The symbol established by the diseases is very creative. Therefore, the message sinks fast.

Also, in Shakespeare's As You Like It, we have the following witty statements:
All the world's a stage
And all the men and women are merely players.
-Jacques.

Here, the temporary nature of human life is portrayed – by comparing it with a stage performance. The wit is established by the image of players coming out to the stage, and leaving as soon as their parts are played. It is creative and philosophical.

Other witty expressions taken from Shakespeare's works include:

Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold.-
Rosalind in As You Like It. Men at some times are masters of their fates-Cassius in Julius Caesar.
There's daggers in men's smiles. (Macbeth).
The near in blood, the nearer bloody. -Donalbain in Macbeth.

In African drama, the use of wit comes in form of proverbs. Such proverbs are creative and concise. They also provide philosophical thoughts about life. For instance, in Ola Rotimi's The God's Are Not To Blame, we have this proverb:
Kola nut lasts long in the mouths of those who value

it. The wit is established by the image of Kolanuts being kept long in the mouth of those who know its value. It shows the high premium people place on valuable things.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, when the mother goat chews curd, the kids watch it.

In all the examples analyzed above, we notice the sharpness with which the expressions are made. All the expressions are clever and capable of making us laugh. They are also sensible as they conjure up a certain sense of seriousness. An imagery is created. Generally, while witty statements carry with them jokes and make for relaxation in highly tensed up plays, they require a lot of mental rigour to understand. Witty statements abound in tragedies and comedies. The important thing is to strive to discern the message and remark the creative use of the language.

Humour: Humour as used in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance period refers to the admixture of the four bodily fluids which determine a person's temperament and behaviour. These fluids are blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black-bile. The predominance of any of these fluids, which determine the temperament and behaviour of the individual, influences a person's behaviour. Thus, a person could be sanguine if the blood humour is

predominantly phlegmatic; if the humour of phlegm predominates; choleric if the yellow bile predominates, and melancholic if the black-bile is dominant. A person is sanguine if he shows so much optimism; phlegmatic, if he is too calm, and shows little excitement; choleric, if he very easily gets angry; and melancholic if he is always depressed. You can imagine the kind of laughter that will go with a character who is always angry as Tybalt is in *Romeo and Juliet*, or a character that is always depressed. A character can also become an object of laughter if he is always calm or ever optimistic like 'Agha' in popular Nigerian comedies. The dramatists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance period capitalized on such extremes of humours to create characters that could excite laughter. But, in recent times, beginning from the 18th Century to the more recent times, humour has been associated with ability to cause laughter in literary works or comic shows, media vibes and even in life ordinarily. While wit relates to the use of language, humour is not restricted to the use of language. In drama, whatever excites laughter can be said to be humorous. Humour can be achieved through costumes (Village headmaster), ways of speaking (Zeburdaya Okoloigwe Nwogbo in the *Masquerade*), gait (Osuofia in *Ogene Boys*) or even

mannerism (Agha). Many of the comics in old as well as modern plays are humorous in their dressing, speech, gait and antics. Also in J.P. Clark's Ozidi, the presentations of such characters like the Scrotum King, Odogwu, the ugly, Bou-Karakarabiri and Temugadege, Ozidi's idiot brother excites laughter. Their comic essence is further reinforced by their personal antics. For instance, Bou-Karakarabiri walks with his head buried in the soil and his fly-infested buttocks is not so disgusting as he is amusing. In Soyinka's The Lion and Jewel, Lakunle's dressing in old and under-sized coat that is thread bare excites laughter just like his use of English which the simple villagers cannot understand. In most of the Nigerian comic plays on the television, there are such humorous characters like Gringory and Clarus nde in The New Masquerade and Papiluwe in Ojo Ladipo Theatre, whose clothes and ways of speaking cause a lot of laughter. Humour thrives to make us laugh.

Incongruity: Incongruity as a dramatic technique involves the use of language in such a way that it will be off context. It may involve equivocation, that is saying one thing and contradicting it at the same time. At times, two or more words that are ambiguous are used in such a way that those who hear and understand them are thrift. A notable

10

example of incongruity is the drunken porter's scene in Shakespeare's Macbeth. After Duncan had been murdered, Macduff and Lennox come to visit Macbeth and see the King Duncan. The porter, before opening the gate makes statements that are inappropriate in the given situation, but which turns out to have truth in them. The unrelatedness of the porter's speech to the issues at stake introduces some elements of shock and humor. Therefore, though Macduff and Lennox are disturbed by the unusual happenings the previous night, they are amused and shocked. There can be also actions that are incongruous or inappropriate in certain circumstances. Brother Jero's lust for the naked body of the girl who comes to bathe in the beach is inconsistent with the claim to be a prophet in Soyinka's The Trials of Brother Jero. In Ola Rotimi's The Gods are Not to Blame, we notice Iya Aburo, a mad woman, whose husband has been killed by the sickness making some incongruous statements.....

Come, My husband.....
We have just finished eating yams
In the king's small bathroom.....

The idea of eating yam in the bathroom is incongruous in the stories about pestilence in the land and it is shocking and points towards the level to

11

which man can sink under the yoke of anguish. The humour in the statement is serious and rather frightening.

Comic characters:

Drama involves a lot of imitation. There are actors and actresses who imitate the actions and behaviour of some identified characters in different settings. The characters to be imitated could be a king or servant, heroes or cowards; they could also be nobles or clowns. There are different characters for different kinds of plays. Tragedies for instance, have tragic heroes. But, it is possible to introduce comic characters even in tragedies. There are usually comic characters in comedies.

Comic characters are of two types – the trickster and the clown. The trickster is usually cunning. His activities excite humour and are used to teach people a few things about life. He has a very powerful way of persuading people to do things. (Baroka in the Lion & the Jewel) The repetition and success of his tricks are the sources of humour. The clown is a much more noticeable comic character. He dresses like a fool and behaves in funny ways. He may wear masks to create more humour. The way he speaks is also a source of humour.

There are two types of clowns. There are the dry clowns and sly clowns. The dry clown is presented

12

as a butt, a person to be laughed at, and who is not bothered by anything. The sly clown is always presented as a simpleton (eg Osnoffia). He uses his folly to shoot his wit. He may be saying what appears foolish eg

A mad man comes to a funeral parlour and people are saying REST IN PEACE—RIP. He interpretes it as RIP - Rise If Possible.

Is he not making sense? But under close observation, it will be discovered that he is making real sense. The two clowns identified may wander or blunder, they may quibble or equivocate but with some creativity.

In Shakespeare's As You Like It, Touch stone is presented as a dry clown whom many people laugh at. Also in Romeo and Juliet, the Nurse is a dry clown. Her way of speaking causes laughter. In Macbeth, the porter looks clownish in his grossing and in speech. But, through him and what he says, we learn lessons about the nature of life and some of the events that are necessary developments of the play.

13

CHAPTER THREE

SOCIETAL BASIS FOR COMEDY

Questions

1. What is the difference between wit and humour?
2. Write down three elements that can create humour in drama.
3. Give two examples in which incongruity has been used in drama.
4. Write down the two main kinds of comic characters.

Have you ever watched a masquerade staged by children during festive occasions-religious or traditional? Have you ever been amused by them? can you recall the source of your amusement?

Well, lets us assume that there is one of such masquerades before us now; that there are six boys involved; that one of them is wearing a mask and a multi-coloured raffia outfit; that music is produced by three of them on instruments like empty cans, wooden flutes, local drums and other improvised musical instruments; and that other members of the troupe give us impromptu dramatic sketches that mimic experiences in our daily lives. The masked member of the troupe in his multicolored raffia outfit is the central actor. His mask also has qualities that make him stand out as the centre of attraction. The face-mask has exaggerated features like large bulging eyes, fat protruding teeth and different patch