This book was written not only for authors and playwrights, but for the general public. If the reading public understands the mechanism of writing, if that public becomes aware of the hardships, the tremendous effort that goes into any and all literary work, appreciation will become more spontaneous.

The reader will find at the end of this book synopses of plays, analyzed according to dialectics. We hope these will add to the reader's understanding of novels and short stories in general, and of plays and movies in particular.

We shall discuss plays in this book without acclaiming or dismissing each one in its entirety. When we quote passages to illustrate a point, we are not necessarily approving the whole play.

We deal with both modern and classical plays. There is an emphasis on the classics because most modern plays are too soon forgotten. Most intelligent people are familiar with the classics and they are always available for study.

We have based our theory on the eternally changing “character” who forever reacts, almost violently, to constantly changing internal and external stimuli.

What is the fundamental make-up of a human being, any human being—perhaps you, who are reading these very lines? This question must be answered before we can settle down to discuss “point of attack,” “orchestration,” and the rest. We must know more about the biology of the subject that we see later, in movement.

We begin with a dissection of “premise,” “character,” and
"conflict." This is to give the reader an inkling of that power which will drive a character to greater heights or to his destruction.

A builder who does not know the material he has to work with courts disaster. In our case, the materials are "premise," "character," and "conflict." Before knowing all these in their minutest detail, it is useless to speak of how to write a play. We hope the reader will find this approach helpful.

In this book we propose to show a new approach to writing in general, and to playwriting in particular. This approach is based on the natural law of dialectics.

Great plays, written by immortal authors, have come down to us through the ages. Yet even geniuses often wrote very bad plays.

Why? Because they wrote on the basis of instinct, rather than from exact knowledge. Instinct may lead a man once, or several times, to create a masterpiece, but as sheer instinct it may lead him just as often to create a failure.

Authorities have listed the laws governing the science of playwriting. Aristotle, the first and undoubtedly the most important influence on the drama, said 2500 years ago:

Most important of all is the structure of the incidents, not of man, but of action and life.

Aristotle denied the importance of character, and his influence persists today. Others have declared character the all-important factor in any type of writing. Lope de Vega, the sixteenth-century Spanish dramatist, gave this outline:

In the first act set forth the case. In the second weave together the events, in such wise that until the middle of the third act one may hardly guess the outcome. Always trick expectancy; and hence it may come to pass that something quite far from what is promised may be left to the understanding.
The German critic and playwright Lessing wrote:

The strictest observation of the rules cannot outweigh the smallest fault in a character.

The French dramatist Corneille wrote:

It is certain that there are laws of the drama, since it is an art; but it is not certain what these laws are.

And so on, all contradicting one another. Some go so far as to claim that there can be no rules whatsoever. This is the strangest view of all. We know there are rules for eating, walking, and breathing; we know there are rules for painting, music, dancing, flying, and bridge building; we know there are rules for every manifestation of life and nature—why, then, should writing be the sole exception? Obviously, it is not.

Some writers who have tried to list rules have told us that a play is made up of different parts: theme, plot, incidents, conflict, complications, obligatory scene, atmosphere, dialogue, and climax. Books have been written on each of these parts, explaining and analyzing them for the student.

These authors have treated their subject matter honestly. They have studied the work of other men in the same field. They have written plays of their own and learned from their own experience. But the reader has never been satisfied. Something was missing. The student still did not understand the relationship between complication, tension, conflict, and mood or what any of these or kindred topics related to play-making had to do with the good play he wanted to write. He knew what was meant by "theme," but when he tried to apply this knowledge he was lost. After all, William Archer said theme was unnecessary. Percival Wilde said it was necessary at the beginning, but must be buried so deeply that no one could detect it. Which was right?

Then consider the so-called obligatory scene. Some authorities said it was vital; others said there was no such thing. And
why was it vital—if it was? Or why wasn’t it—if it wasn’t? Each textbook writer explained his own pet theory, but not one of them related it to the whole in such a way as to help the student. The unifying force was missing.

We believe that obligatory scene, tension, atmosphere, and the rest are superfluous. They are the effect of something much more important. It is useless to tell a playwright that he needs an obligatory scene, or that his play lacks tension or complication, unless you can tell him how to achieve these things. And a definition is not the answer.

There must be something to generate tension, something to create complication, without any conscious attempt on the playwright’s part to do so. There must be a force which will unify all parts, a force out of which they will grow as naturally as limbs grow from the body. We think we know what that force is: human character, in all its infinite ramifications and dialectical contradictions.

Not for a moment do we believe that this book has said the last word on playwriting. On the contrary. Breaking a new road, one makes many mistakes and sometimes becomes inarticulate. Those coming after us will dig deeper and bring this dialectical approach to writing to a more crystallized form than we ever hope to do. This book, using a dialectical approach, is itself subject to the laws of dialectics. The theory advanced here is a thesis. Its contradiction will be the antithesis. From the two will be formed a synthesis, uniting both the thesis and antithesis. This is the road to truth.