A man sits in his workshop, busy with an invention of wheels and springs. You ask him what the gadget is, what it is meant to do. He looks at you confidingly and whispers: "I really don't know."

Another man rushes down the street, panting for breath. You intercept him and ask where he is going. He gasps: "How should I know where I'm going? I am on my way."

Your reaction—and ours, and the world's—is that these two men are a little mad. Every sensible invention must have a purpose, every planned sprint a destination.

Yet, fantastic as it seems, this simple necessity has not made itself felt to any extent in the theater. Reams of paper bear miles of writing—all of it without any point at all. There is much feverish activity, a great deal of get-up-and-go, but no one seems to know where he is going.

Everything has a purpose, or premise. Every second of our life has its own premise, whether or not we are conscious of it at the time. That premise may be as simple as breathing or as complex as a vital emotional decision, but it is always there.

We may not succeed in proving each tiny premise, but that in no way alters the fact that there was one we meant to prove. Our attempt to cross the room may be impeded by an unobserved footstool, but our premise existed nevertheless.

The premise of each second contributes to the premise of the minute of which it is part, just as each minute gives its bit of life to the hour, and the hour to the day. And so, at the end, there is a premise for every life.
Webster's International Dictionary says:

Premise: a proposition antecedently supposed or proved; a basis of argument. A proposition stated or assumed as leading to a conclusion.

Others, especially men of the theater, have had different words for the same thing: theme, thesis, root idea, central idea, goal, aim, driving force, subject, purpose, plan, plot, basic emotion.

For our own use we choose the word “premise” because it contains all the elements the other words try to express and because it is less subject to misinterpretation.

Ferdinand Brunetière demands a “goal” in the play to start with. This is premise.

John Howard Lawson: “The root-idea is the beginning of the process.” He means premise.

Professor Brander Matthews: “A play needs to have a theme.” It must be the premise.

Professor George Pierce Baker, quoting Dumas the Younger: “How can you tell what road to take unless you know where you are going?” The premise will show you the road.

They all mean one thing: you must have a premise for your play.

Let us examine a few plays and see whether they have premises.

Romeo and Juliet

The play starts with a deadly feud between two families, the Capulets and the Montagues. The Montagues have a son, Romeo, and the Capulets a daughter, Juliet. The youngsters’ love for each other is so great that they forget the traditional hate between their two families. Juliet’s parents try to force her to marry Count Paris, and, unwilling to do this, she goes to the good friar, her friend, for advice. He tells her to take a strong sleeping draught on the eve of her wedding which will
make her seemingly dead for forty-two hours. Juliet follows his advice. Everyone thinks her dead. This starts the onrushing tragedy for the two lovers. Romeo, believing Juliet really dead, drinks poison and dies beside her. When Juliet awakens and finds Romeo dead, without hesitation she decides to unite with him in death.

This play obviously deals with love. But there are many kinds of love. No doubt this was a great love, since the two lovers not only defied family tradition and hate, but threw away life to unite in death. The premise, then, as we see it is: “Great love defies even death.”

King Lear

The King’s trust in his two daughters is grievously misplaced. They strip him of all his authority, degrade him, and he dies insane, a broken, humiliated old man.

Lear trusts his oldest daughters implicitly. Because he believes their glittering words, he is destroyed.

A vain man believes flattery and trusts those who flatter him. But those who flatter cannot be trusted, and those who believe the flatterers are courting disaster.

It seems, then, that “Blind trust leads to destruction” is the premise of this play.

Macbeth

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, in their ruthless ambition to achieve their goal, decide to kill King Duncan. Then, to strengthen himself in his position, Macbeth hires assassins to kill Banquo, whom he fears. Later, he is forced to commit still more murders in order to entrench himself more securely in the position he has reached through murder. Finally, the nobles and his own subjects become so aroused that they rise against him, and Macbeth perishes as he lived—by the sword. Lady Macbeth dies of haunting fear.
What can be the premise of this play? The question is, what is the motivating force? No doubt it is ambition. What kind of ambition? Ruthless, since it is drenched in blood. Macbeth's downfall was foreshadowed in the very method by which he achieved his ambition. So, as we see, the premise for Macbeth is: "Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction."

Othello

Othello finds Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's lodging. It had been taken there by Iago for the very purpose of making him jealous. Othello therefore kills Desdemona and plunges a dagger into his own heart.

Here the leading motivation is jealousy. No matter what caused this green-eyed monster to raise its ugly head, the important thing is that jealousy is the motivating force in this play, and since Othello kills not only Desdemona but himself as well, the premise, as we see it, is: "Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its love."

Ghosts, by Ibsen

The basic idea is heredity. The play grew out of a Biblical quotation which is the premise: "The sins of the fathers are visited on the children." Every word uttered, every move made, every conflict in the play, comes about because of this premise.

Dead End, by Sidney Kingsley

Here the author obviously wants to show and prove that "Poverty encourages crime." He does.

Sweet Bird of Youth, by Tennessee Williams

A ruthless young man who yearns for fame as an actor makes love to the daughter of a rich man; she contracts a venereal disease. The young man finds an aging actress who supports him in exchange for love-making. His downfall comes when
he is castrated by a mob driven by the girl's father. For this play the premise is: "Ruthless ambition leads to destruction."

**Juno and the Paycock, by Sean O'Casey**

Captain Boyle, a shiftless, boastful drinker, is told that a rich relative died and left him a large sum of money, which will shortly be paid to him. Immediately Boyle and his wife, Juno, prepare themselves for a life of ease: they borrow money from neighbors on the strength of the coming inheritance, buy gaudy furniture, and Boyle spends large sums on drink. It later develops that the inheritance will never come to them, because the will was worded vaguely. The angry creditors descend on them and strip the house. Woe piles on woe: Boyle's daughter, having been seduced, is about to have a baby; his son is killed, and his wife and daughter leave him. At the end, Boyle has nothing left; he has hit bottom.

Premise: "Shiftlessness leads to ruin."

**Shadow and Substance, by Paul Vincent Carroll**

Thomas Skeritt, canon in a small Irish community, refuses to admit that his servant, Bridget, has really seen visions of Saint Bridget, her patron saint. Thinking her mentally deranged, he tries to send her away on a vacation and, above all, refuses to perform a miracle which, according to the servant, Saint Bridget requests of him. In trying to rescue a schoolmaster from an angry crowd, Bridget is killed, and the canon loses his pride before the girl's pure, simple faith.

Premise: "Faith conquers pride."

We are not sure that the author of Juno and the Paycock knew that his premise was "Shiftlessness leads to ruin." The son's death, for instance, has nothing to do with the main concept of the drama. Sean O'Casey has excellent character studies, but the second act stands still because he had only a nebulous idea to start his play with. That is why he missed writing a truly great play.
Shadow and Substance, on the other hand, has two premises. In the first two acts and the first three quarters of the last act, the premise is: "Intelligence conquers superstition." At the end, suddenly and without warning, "intelligence" of the premise changes to "faith," and "superstition" to "pride." The canon—the pivotal character—changes like a chameleon into something he was not a few moments before. The play becomes muddled in consequence.

Every good play must have a well-formulated premise. There may be more than one way to phrase the premise, but, however it is phrased, the thought must be the same.

Playwrights usually get an idea, or are struck by an unusual situation, and decide to write a play around it.

The question is whether that idea, or that situation, provides sufficient basis for a play. Our answer is no, although we are aware that out of a thousand playwrights, nine hundred and ninety-nine start this way.

No idea, and no situation, was ever strong enough to carry you through to its logical conclusion without a clear-cut premise.

If you have no such premise, you may modify, elaborate, vary your original idea or situation, or even lead yourself into another situation, but you will not know where you are going. You will flounder, rack your brain to invent further situations to round out your play. You may find these situations—and you will still be without a play.

You must have a premise—a premise which will lead you unmistakably to the goal your play hopes to reach.

Moses L. Malevinsky says in The Science of Playwrighting:

Emotion, or the elements in or of an emotion, constitute the basic things in life. Emotion is life. Life is emotion. Therefore emotion is drama. Drama is emotion.

No emotion ever made, or ever will make, a good play if
we do not know \textit{what kind of forces} set emotion going. Emotion, to be sure, is as necessary to a play as barking to a dog.

Mr. Malevinsky's contention is that if you accept his basic principle, emotion, your problem is solved. He gives you a list of basic emotions—desire, fear, pity, love, hate—any one of which, he says, is a sound base for your play. Perhaps. But it will never help you to write a \textit{good} play, because it designates no goal. Love, hate, any basic emotion, is merely an emotion. It may revolve around itself, destroying, building—and getting nowhere.

It may be that an emotion does find itself a goal and surprises even the author. But this is an accident and far too uncertain to offer the young playwright as a method. Our aim is to eliminate chance and accident. Our aim is to point a road on which anyone who can write may travel and eventually find himself with a sure approach to drama. So, the very first thing you must have is a premise. And it must be a premise worded so that anyone can understand it as the author intended it to be understood. An unclear premise is as bad as no premise at all.

The author using a badly worded, false, or badly constructed premise finds himself filling space and time with pointless dialogue—even action—and not getting anywhere near the proof of his premise. Why? Because he has no direction.

Let us suppose that we want to write a play about a frugal character. Shall we make fun of him? Shall we make him ridiculous, or tragic? We don't know, yet. We have only an idea, which is to depict a frugal man. Let us pursue the idea further. Is it wise to be frugal? To a degree, yes. But we do not want to write about a man who is moderate, who is prudent, who wisely saves for a rainy day. Such a man is not frugal; he is farsighted. We are looking for a man who is so frugal he denies himself bare necessities. His insane frugality is such that he
loses more in the end than he gains. We now have the premise for our play: "Frugality leads to waste."

The above premise—for that matter, every good premise—is composed of three parts, each of which is essential to a good play. Let us examine "Frugality leads to waste." The first part of this premise suggests character—a frugal character. The second part, "leads to," suggests conflict, and the third part, "waste," suggests the end of the play.

Let us see if this is so. "Frugality leads to waste." The premise suggests a frugal person who, in his eagerness to save his money, refuses to pay his taxes. This act necessarily evokes a counteraction—conflict—from the state, and the frugal person is forced to pay triple the original amount.

"Frugality," then, suggests character; "leads to" suggests conflict; "waste" suggests the end of the play.

A good premise is a thumbnail synopsis of your play.

Here are a few other premises:

**Bitterness leads to false gaiety.**
**Foolish generosity leads to poverty.**
**Honesty defeats duplicity.**
**Heedlessness destroys friendship.**
**Ill-temper leads to isolation.**
**Materialism conquers mysticism.**
**Prudishness leads to frustration.**
**Bragging leads to humiliation.**
**Confusion leads to frustration.**
**Craftiness digs its own grave.**
**Dishonesty leads to exposure.**
**Dissipation leads to self-destruction.**
**Egotism leads to loss of friends.**
**Extravagance leads to destitution.**
**Fickleness leads to loss of self-esteem.**

Although these are only flat statements, they contain all that is required of a well-constructed premise: character, con-
PREMISE

flict, and conclusion. What is wrong, then? What is missing?
The author's conviction is missing. Until he takes sides, there is no play. Only when he champions one side of the issue does the premise spring to life. Does egotism lead to loss of friends? Which side will you take? We, the readers or spectators of your play, do not necessarily agree with your conviction. Through your play you must therefore prove to us the validity of your contention.

QUESTION: I am a bit confused. Do you mean to tell me that without a clear-cut premise I can't start to write a play?
ANSWER: Of course you can. There are many ways to find your premise. Here is one.

If you notice enough peculiarities in your Aunt Clara or Uncle Joshua, for instance, you may feel they possess excellent material for a play, but you will probably not think of a premise immediately. They are exciting characters, so you study their behavior, watch every step they make. You decide that Aunt Clara, though a religious fanatic, is a busybody, a gossip. She butts into everybody's affairs. Perhaps you know of several couples who separated because of Aunt Clara's malicious interference. You still have no premise. You have no idea yet what makes this woman do what she does. Why does Aunt Clara take such devilish joy in making a lot of trouble for innocent people?

Since you intend to write a play about her because her character fascinates you, you'll try to discover as much as possible about her past and present. The moment you start on your fact-finding journey, whether you know it or not, you have taken the first step toward finding a premise. The premise is the motivating power behind everything we do. So you will ask questions of your relatives and of your parents about the past conduct of Aunt Clara. You may be shocked to learn that this religious fanatic in her youth was not exactly moral. She sowed her wild oats promiscuously.
A woman committed suicide when Aunt Clara alienated her husband's affections and later married him. But, as usually happens in such cases, the shadow of the dead woman haunted them until the man disappeared. She loved this man madly and saw in this desertion the finger of God. She became a religious fanatic. She made a resolution to spend her remaining years doing penance. She started to reform everyone she came in contact with. She interfered with people's lives. She spied on innocent lovers who hid in dark corners whispering sweet nothings. She exhorted them for their sinful thoughts and actions. In short, she became a menace to the community.

The author who wants to write this play still has no premise. No matter. The story of Aunt Clara's life slowly takes shape nevertheless. There are still many loose ends to which the playwright can return later, when he has found his premise. The question to ask right now is: what will be the end of this woman? Can she go on the rest of her life interfering with and actually crippling people's lives? Of course not. But since Aunt Clara is still alive and going strong on her self-appointed crusade, the author has to determine what will be the end of her, not in reality, but in the play.

Actually, Aunt Clara might live to be a hundred and die in an accident or in bed, peacefully. Will that help the play? Positively not. Accident would be an outside factor which is not inherent in the play. Sickness and peaceful death, ditto. Her death—if death it will be—must spring from her actions. A man or woman whose life she wrecked might take vengeance on her and send her back to her Maker. In her overzealousness she might overstep all bounds, go against the Church itself, and be excommunicated. Or she might find herself in such compromising circumstances that only suicide could extricate her.

Whichever of these three possible ends is chosen, the
premise will suggest itself: "Extremity (whichever it is) leads to destruction." Now you know the beginning and the end of your play. She was promiscuous to start with, this promiscuity caused a suicide, and she lost the one person she ever really loved. This tragedy brought about her slow but persistent transformation into a religious fanatic. Her fanaticism wrecked lives, and in turn her life was taken.

No, you don’t have to start your play with a premise. You can start with a character or an incident, or even a simple thought. This thought or incident grows, and the story slowly unfolds itself. You have time to find your premise in the mass of your material later. The important thing is to find it.

**QUESTION:** Can I use a premise, let us say, "Great love defies even death," without being accused of plagiarism?

**ANSWER:** You can use it with safety. Although the seed is the same as that of Romeo and Juliet, the play will be different. You never have seen, and never will see, two exactly similar oak trees. The shape of a tree, its height and strength, will be determined by the place and the surroundings where the seeds happen to fall and germinate. No two dramatists think or write alike. Ten thousand playwrights can take the same premise, as they have done since Shakespeare, and not one play will resemble the other except in the premise. Your knowledge, your understanding of human nature, and your imagination will take care of that.

**QUESTION:** Is it possible to write one play on two premises?

**ANSWER:** It is possible, but it will not be a good play. Can you go in two different directions at the same time? The dramatist has a big enough job on his hands to prove one premise, let alone two or three. A play with more than one premise is necessarily confused.

The Philadelphia Story, by Philip Barry, is one of this type. The first premise in this play is: "Sacrifice on both sides is necessary for a successful marriage." The second
premise is: “Money, or the lack of it, is not solely responsible for a man’s character.”

Another play of this kind is Skylark, by Samson Raphaelson. The premises are: “A wealthy woman needs an anchor in life” and “A man who loves his wife will make sacrifices for her.”

Not only do these plays have two premises, but the premises are inactive and badly stated.

Good acting, excellent production, and clever dialogue may spell success sometimes, but they alone will never make a good play.

Don’t think that every produced play has a clear-cut premise, although there is an idea behind every play. In Night Music, by Clifford Odets, for instance, the premise is: “Young people must face the world with courage.” It has an idea, but not an active premise.

Another play with an idea, but a confused one, is William Saroyan’s The Time of Your Life. The premise, “Life is wonderful,” is a sprawling, formless thing, as good as no premise at all.

**Question:** It is hard to determine just what is the basic emotion in a play. Take Romeo and Juliet, for instance. Without hate of the two families, the lovers could have lived happily. Instead of love, it seems to me that hate is the basic emotion in this play.

**Answer:** Did hate subdue these youngsters’ love for each other? It did not. It spurred them to greater effort. Their love deepened with each adversity. They were willing to give up their name, they dared their family’s hatred, and, at the end, gave their life for love. Hatred was vanquished at the end, not their love. Love was on trial by hatred, and love won with flying colors. Love did not grow out of hatred, but despite hatred love flourished. As we see it, the basic emotion of Romeo and Juliet is still love.
QUESTION: I still don't know how to determine which is the basic trend or emotion in a play.

ANSWER: Let us take another example, then: *Ghosts*, by Ibsen.

The premise of this play is: "*The sins of the fathers are visited on the children.*" Let us see if it is so. Captain Alving sowed his wild oats both before and after his marriage. He died of syphilis contracted during his escapades. He left a son, who inherited this disease from him. Oswald, the son, grew to be imbecilic, and was doomed to die with the merciful help of his own mother. All the other issues of the play, including the love affair with the maid, grew out of the above premise. The premise of the play obviously deals with heredity.

Lillian Hellman started work on an idea drawn from one of William Roughead’s reports of old Scottish trials. In 1830 or thereabouts, a little Indian girl succeeded in disrupting a British school. Lillian Hellman’s first success, *The Children’s Hour*, was based on this situation, reports Robert van Gelder in *The New York Times*, April 21st, 1941. The interview goes on:

"The evolution of *Watch on the Rhine,*" said Miss Hellman, "is quite involved and, I’m afraid, not very interesting. When I was working on *The Little Foxes* I hit on the idea—well, there’s a small Midwestern American town, average or perhaps a little more isolated than average, and into that town Europe walks in the form of a titled couple—a pair of titled Europeans—pausing on their way to the West Coast. I was quite excited, thought of shelving the foxes to work on it. But when I did get to it I couldn’t get it moving. It started all right—and then stuck.

"Later I had another idea. What would be the reactions of some sensitive people who had spent much of their lives starving in Europe and found themselves as house guests in the home of some very wealthy Americans? What would they make
of all the furious rushing around, the sleeping tablets taken when there is no time to sleep them off, the wonderful dinners ordered and never eaten, and so on and so on. . . . That play didn’t work either. I kept worrying at it, and the earlier people, the titled couple, returned continually. It would take all afternoon and probably a lot of tomorrow to trail all the steps that made those two plays into Watch on the Rhine. The titled couple are still in, but as minor characters. The Americans are nice people, and so on. All is changed, but the new play grew out of the other two."

A playwright might work on a story for weeks before discovering that he really needs a premise, which will show the destination of his play. Let us trace an idea which will slowly arrive at a premise. Let us assume that you want to write a play about love.

What kind of love? Well, it must be a great love, you decide, one that will overcome prejudice, hatred, adversity, one that cannot be bought or bargained with. The audience should be moved to tears at the sacrifice the lovers make for each other, at the sight of love triumphant. This is the idea, and it is not a bad one. But you have no premise, and until you choose one you cannot write your fine play.

There is a fairly obvious premise implicit in your idea: "Love defies all." But this is an ambiguous statement. It says too much and therefore says nothing. What is this "all"? You might answer that it is obstacles, but we can still ask: "What obstacles?" And if you say that "Love can move mountains," we are justified in asking what good will that do?

In your premise you must designate exactly how great this love is, show exactly what its destination is, and how far it will go.

Let us go all the way and show a love so great that it conquers even death. Our premise is clear-cut: "Does love defy even death?" The answer in this case is "Yes." It designates the road the lovers will travel. They will die for love. It is
an active premise, so that when you ask what love will defy, it is possible to answer “death,” categorically. As a result, you not only know how far your lovers are willing to go; you also have an inkling as to the kind of characters they are, the characters they must be to carry the premise to its logical conclusion.

Can this girl be silly, unemotional, scheming? Hardly. Can the boy, or man, be superficial, flighty? Hardly—unless they are shallow only until they meet. Then the battle would begin, first, against the trivial lives they had been living, then against their families, religions, and all the other motivating factors aligned against them. As they go along they will grow in stature, strength, determination, and, at the end, despite even death—in death—they will be united.

If you have a clear-cut premise, almost automatically a synopsis unrolls itself. You elaborate on it, providing the minute details, the personal touches.

We are taking it for granted that if you choose the above premise,” Great love defies even death,” you believe in it. You should believe in it, since you are to prove it. You must show conclusively that life is worthless without the loved one. And if you do not sincerely believe that this is so, you will have a very hard time trying to provide the emotional intensity of Nora, in A Doll’s House, or of Juliet, in Romeo and Juliet.

Did Shakespeare, Molière, and Ibsen believe in their own premises? Almost certainly. But if they did not, their genius was strong enough to feel what they described, to relive their heroes’ lives so intensely that they convinced the audience of their sincerity.

You, however, should not write anything you do not believe. The premise should be a conviction of your own, so that you may prove it wholeheartedly. Perhaps it is a preposterous premise to me—it must not be so to you.

Although you should never mention your premise in the
dialogue of your play, the audience must know what the message is. And whatever it is, you must prove it.

We have seen how an idea—the usual preliminary to a play—may come to you at any time. And we have seen why it must be turned into a premise. The process of changing an idea into a premise is not a difficult one. You can start to write your play any way—even haphazardly—if, at the end, all the necessary parts are in place.

It may be that the story is complete in your mind, but you still have no premise. Can you proceed to write your play? You had better not, however finished it seems to you. If jealousy predicated the sad ending, obviously you might have written a play about jealousy. But have you considered where this jealousy sprang from? Was the woman flirtatious? The man inferior? Did a friend of the family force his attentions upon the woman? Was she bored with her husband? Did the husband have mistresses? Did she sell herself to help out her sick husband? Was it just a misunderstanding? And so forth.

Every one of these possibilities needs a different premise. For instance: “Promiscuity during marriage leads to jealousy and murder.” If you take this as your premise, you’ll know what caused jealousy in this particular instance, and that it leads the promiscuous person to kill or be killed. The premise will suggest the one and only road that you must take. Many premises can deal with jealousy, but in your case there will be only one motivating power which will drive your play to its inevitable conclusion. A promiscuous person will act differently from one who is not promiscuous, or from a woman who sells herself to help keep her husband alive. Although you may have the story set in your mind or even on paper, you cannot necessarily dispense with a clear-cut premise.

It is idiotic to go about hunting for a premise, since, as we have pointed out, it should be a conviction of yours. You know what your own convictions are. Look them over. Per-
haps you are interested in man and his idiosyncrasies. Take just one of those peculiarities, and you have material for several premises.

Remember the fable about the elusive bluebird? A man searched all over the world for the bluebird of happiness, and when he returned home he found it had been there all the time. It is unnecessary to torture your brain, to weary yourself by searching for a premise, when there are so many ready to hand. Anyone who has a few strong convictions is a mine of premises.

Suppose you do find a premise in your wanderings. At best it is alien to you. It did not grow from you; it is not part of you. A good premise represents the author.

We are taking it for granted that you want to write a fine play, something which will endure. The strange thing is that all plays, including farces, are better when the author feels he has something important to say.

Does this hold for so light a form as the crime play? Let us see. You have a brilliant idea for a drama in which someone commits the "perfect crime." You work it out in minutest detail, until you are sure it is thrilling and will hold any audience spellbound. You tell it to your friend, and he is—bored. You are shocked. What's wrong? Perhaps you'd better get the opinion of others. You do, and receive polite encouragement. But you feel in your marrow that they do not like it. Are they all morons? You begin to doubt your play. You rework it, fixing a little here, a little there—and go back to your friends. They've heard the darned thing before, so they're honestly bored now. A few go so far as to tell you so. Your heart sinks. You still do not know what is wrong, but you do know that the play is bad. You hate it and try to forget it.

Without seeing your play we can tell you what was wrong with it: it had no clear-cut premise. And if there is no clear-cut, active premise, it is more than possible that the characters
were not alive. How could they be? They do not know, for instance, why they should commit a perfect crime. Their only reason is your command, and as a result all their performance and all their dialogue are artificial. No one believes what they do or say.

You may not believe it, but the characters in a play are supposed to be real people. They are supposed to do things for reasons of their own. If a man is going to commit the perfect crime, he must have a deep-rooted motivation for doing so.

Crime is not an end in itself. Even those who commit crime through madness have a reason. Why are they mad? What motivated their sadism, their lust, their hate? The reasons behind the events are what interest us. The daily papers are full of reports of murder, arson, rape. After a while we are honestly nauseated with them. Why should we go to the theater to see them, if not to find out why they were done?

A young girl murders her mother. Horrible. But why? What were the steps that led to the murder? The more the dramatist reveals, the better the play. The more you can reveal of the environment, the physiology and the psychology of the murderer, and his or her personal premise, the more successful you will be.

Everything in existence is closely related to everything else. You cannot treat any subject as though it were isolated from the rest of life.

If the reader accepts our reasoning, he will drop the idea of writing a play about how someone committed a perfect crime, and turn to why someone did.

Let us go through the steps of planning a crime play, seeing how the various elements fit together.

What shall the crime be? Embezzlement, blackmail, theft, murder? Let us choose murder, and get on to the criminal. Why would he kill? For lust? Money? Revenge? Ambition? To right a wrong? There are so many types of murder that we must answer this question at once. Suppose we choose am-
bition as the motive behind the murder and see where it leads us.

The murderer must reach a position where someone stands in his way. He will try everything to influence the man who stands in his path, he will do anything to win his favor. Perhaps the men become friends, and the murder is averted. But no—the prospective victim must be adamant, else there will be no murder—and no play. But why should he be adamant? We don’t know, because we don’t know our premise.

We might stop here for a moment and see how the play would turn out if we continued without a premise. But that is unnecessary. Just a glance at what we have to work with will indicate how flimsy the structure is. A man is going to kill another man who thwarts his ambition. That has been the idea behind hundreds of plays, but it is far too weak to serve as the basis for a synopsis. Let us look more deeply into the elements we have here and find an active premise.

The murderer will kill to win his goal. He’s not a fine type of man, certainly. Murder is a high price to pay for one’s ambition, and it takes a ruthless man to—That’s it! Our killer is ruthless—blind to everything but his selfish ends.

He’s a dangerous man, of no benefit to society. Suppose he succeeds in escaping the consequences of his crime? Suppose he attains a position of responsibility? Think of the harm he might do! Why, he might continue his ruthless path indefinitely, never knowing anything but success! But could he? Is it possible for a man of ruthless ambition to succeed completely? It is not. Ruthlessness, like hate, carries the seeds of its own destruction. Splendid! Then we have the premise: “Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction.”

We know now that our killer will commit a murder as perfect as possible, but that he will be destroyed at the end by his ambition. It opens up unlimited possibilities.

We know our ruthless killer. There is more to know, of course. The understanding of a character is not as simple as
this, as we shall show in our chapter on character. But it is our premise which has given us the outstanding traits of our main character.

"Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction" is the premise of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as we pointed out before.

There are as many ways to arrive at a premise as there are playwrights—more, since most playwrights use more than one method.

Let us take another example.

Suppose a dramatist, on his way home one night, sees a group of youngsters attack a passer-by. He is outraged. Boys of sixteen, eighteen, twenty—and hardenedcriminals! He is so impressed that he decides to write a play on juvenile delinquency. But he realizes that the subject is endless. What exact phase shall he deal with? Holdup, he decides. It was a holdup which so impressed him, and he trusts it will affect an audience the same way.

The kids are stupid, the dramatist reflects. If they are caught their lives are over. They will be sentenced to from twenty years to life imprisonment for robbery. What fools! "I'll bet," he thinks further, "that their victim had very little money on him. They were risking their lives for nothing!"

Yes, yes, it's a good idea for a play, and he starts to work on it. But the story refuses to grow. After all, you can't write three acts about a holdup. The playwright storms, bewildered by his inability to write a play on what he is sure is a fine idea.

A holdup is a holdup. Nothing new. The unusual angle might be the youth of the criminals. But why should such youngsters steal? Perhaps their parents don't give a thought to them. Perhaps their fathers are drunk, wrapped up in their own problems. But why should they be? Why should they turn to drink and neglect their children? There are so many boys like this—not all their fathers can be habitual drunkards, men without any love for their children. Well, they may be men who have lost their authority over their children. They
may be very poor, unable to support their children. Why don't they look for work? Oh, yes, the depression. There is no work, and these kids have lived their lives on the street. Poverty, neglect, and dirt are all they have known. These things are powerful motivation toward crime.

And it is not only the boys in this one slum section. Thousands of boys, all over the country, poverty-ridden, turn to crime as a way out. Poverty has pushed them, encouraged them, to become criminals. That's it! "Poverty encourages crime!" We have our premise, and the dramatist has his.

He looks around for a locality in which to set his drama. He remembers his own childhood, or something he has seen, or a newspaper clipping. At any rate, he thinks of various localities which might well encourage crime. He studies the people, the houses, the influences, the reason for the poverty abounding. He investigates what the city has done about these conditions.

Then he turns to the boys. Are they really stupid? Or have neglect, illness, near-starvation made them so? He decides to concentrate on one character—the one who will help him write the story. He finds him: a nice kid, sixteen years old, with a sister. The father has disappeared, leaving behind the two kids and a sick wife. He could not find a job, became disgusted with life in general, and left home. His wife died soon after. The girl of eighteen insisted she could look after her brother. She loved him, and it was unthinkable to live without him. She'd work. An orphan asylum could have taken Johnny, of course, but then "Poverty encourages crime" would be senseless as a premise. So Johnny prowls the streets while his sister works in a factory.

Johnny has his own philosophy about everything. Other children look to their teachers and parents for guidance. These teach: be obedient, be honest. Johnny knows from his own experience that this is all bunk. If he obeys the law he will go hungry many a day. So he has his own premise: "If
you’re smart enough you can get away with anything.” He has seen it proved time and again. He has stolen things and got away with it. Against Johnny stands the law, whose premise is: “You can’t get away with it,” or “Crime doesn’t pay.”

Johnny has his own heroes, too. Guys who got away with it. He is sure they can outsmart any cop. There is Jack Colley, a local boy, for instance. He came from this very neighborhood. All the cops in the nation were chasing him, and he made fools of them. He’s tops.

To know Johnny as you should, find out about his background, his education, ambition, hero worship, inspiration, friends. Then the premise will cover him and millions of other kids perfectly.

If you see only that Johnny is a roughneck, and you don’t know why, then you will need, and find, another premise, perhaps: “The lack of a strong police force encourages criminals.” Of course, the question arises as to whether this is true. An ignorant person might say yes. But you will have to explain why millionaires’ sons do not go out and steal bread, like Johnny. If there were more police, would poverty and misery diminish in proportion? Experience says no. Then “Poverty encourages crime” is a truer, more practical premise.

It is the premise of Dead End, by Sidney Kingsley.

You must decide just how you are going to treat your premise. Will you indict society? Will you show poverty and a way out of poverty? Kingsley decided to show poverty only and let the audience draw its own conclusions. If you wish to add anything to what Kingsley said, make a subpremise which will enlarge the original one. Enlarge it again, if necessary, so that it will fit your case perfectly. If in the process you find your premise untenable because you have changed your mind as to what you wished to say, formulate a new premise and discard the old.

“Is society responsible for poverty?” Whichever side you
take, you must prove it. Of course, this play will differ from Kingsley’s. You can formulate any number of premises—“poverty,” “love,” “hate”—choosing the one that satisfies you most.

You can arrive at your premise in any one of a great many ways. You may start with an idea which you at once convert to a premise, or you may develop a situation first and see that it has potentialities which need only the right premise to give them meaning and suggest an end.

Emotion can dictate many premises, but you must elaborate them before they can express the dramatist’s idea. Test this with an emotion: jealousy. Jealousy feeds on the sensations generated by an inferiority complex. Jealousy, as such, cannot be a premise, because it designates no goal for the characters. Would it be better if we put it thus: “Jealousy destroys”? No, although we now know what action it takes. Let us go further: “Jealousy destroys itself.” Now there is a goal. We know, and the dramatist knows, that the play will continue until jealousy has destroyed itself. The author may build on it as he chooses, saying, perhaps, “Jealousy destroys not only itself but the object of its love.”

We hope the reader recognizes the difference between the last two premises. The variations are endless, and with each new variation the premise of the play is changed. But whenever you change your premise, you will have to go back to the beginning and rewrite your synopsis in terms of the new premise. If you start out with one premise and switch to another, the play will suffer. No one can build a play on two premises, or a house on two foundations.

Tartuffe, by Molière, offers a good example of how a play grows out of a premise. (See synopsis and analysis on page 274.)

The premise of Tartuffe is: “He who digs a pit for others falls into it himself.”

The play opens with Mme Pernelle upbraiding her son’s
youthful second wife, Elmire, and her grandson and grand-
daughter because they are not showing proper respect for Tartuffe. Tartuffe was taken into the house by her son, Orgon. Tartuffe is obviously a scoundrel masquerading as a holy man. Tartuffe’s real objective is to have an illicit love affair with Orgon’s wife and to take possession of his fortune. His piousness has captured Orgon’s heart, and he now believes in Tartuffe as if he were the Saviour incarnate. But let’s go back to the very beginning of the play.

The author’s objective is to establish the first part of the premise as quickly as possible. Mme Pernelle is speaking:

MME P.: [To Damis, her grandson] If Tartuffe thinks anything sinful you can depend upon it that sinful it is. He is seeking to lead you all on the road to heaven, if you would but follow him.

DAMIS: I’ll travel no road in his company!

MME P.: That is not only foolish but a wicked thing to say. Your father both loves and trusts him, which should surely dispose you to do likewise.

DAMIS: Neither Father nor anyone else could induce me to love him or trust him! I loathe the fellow and all his ways, and I should lie if I said I did not. And if he tries to domineer over me again, I’ll break his head for him.

DORINE: [The maid] Truly, Madame, it is not to be borne that an unknown person who came here penniless and in rags should take it on himself to upset everything and rule over the whole house.

MME P.: I did not ask for your opinion. [To the others] It would be well for this household if he did rule over it.

(This is the first hint of what is actually going to happen later, when Orgon entrusts him with his fortune.)

DORINE: You may think him a saint, Madame, but to my mind he’s a good deal more like a hypocrite.

DAMIS: I’ll be sworn he is.

MME P.: Hold your malicious tongues, both of you—I know you all dislike him—and why? Because he sees your faults and has the courage to tell you of them.
DORINE: He does more than that. He is seeking to prevent Madame from entertaining any company at all. Why should he rave and thunder at her as he does for receiving an ordinary caller? Where's the harm in it? It's my belief that it's all because he's jealous of her!

(Yes, he is jealous, as we'll find out later. Molière takes good care to motivate everything beforehand.)

ELMIRE: Dorine, that is nonsense!

MME P.: It's worse than nonsense. Think what you've dared to hint, girl, and be properly ashamed of yourself! [To the others] It is not dear Tartuffe alone who disapproves of your excessive love of company—it's the whole neighborhood.

My son never did a wiser thing in his life than bringing worthy Tartuffe into this house, for if anyone can recall wandering sheep to the fold, it is he. And if you are wise in time you will heed his warnings that all your visiting, your routs, your balls are so many subtle devices of the Evil One for your soul's destruction.

ELMIRE: Why, Mother? For the pleasure we take in such gatherings is innocent enough.

If you reread the premise, you will notice that someone—in this case, Tartuffe—will ensnare innocent, believing persons—Orgon and his mother—with his hypocritical pretension of saintliness. This will enable him later to take possession of Orgon's fortune and make the lovely Elmire his mistress—if he succeeds.

In the very beginning of the play we feel that this happy family is threatened with dire disaster. We didn't get a glimpse of Orgon yet, only of his mother taking up the cudgel for the pseudo saint. Can it be true that a man in his senses, an ex-army officer, believes in another man so implicitly that he may give him a chance to play havoc with his family? If he does believe so much in Tartuffe, the author established the first part of his premise explicitly.

We have witnessed, then, how Tartuffe, with subtle meth-
ods, and with the help of Orgon, his intended victim, is dig-
gging a pit for Orgon. Will he fall into it? We don’t know yet. 
But our interest is aroused. Let us see whether Orgon’s faith 
in Tartuffe is as firm as his mother wants us to believe.

Orgon has just arrived home from a three-day journey. He 
meets his second wife’s brother, Cléante.

Cléante: I heard you were expected shortly, and waited in the 
hope of seeing you.

Orgon: That was kind. But you must pardon me if, before we 
talk, I ask a question or two of Dorine here. [To Dorine] Has 
all gone well during my absence?

Dorine: Not altogether, Monsieur. Madame was taken with the 
fever the day before yesterday and suffered terribly from pains 
in her head.

Orgon: Did she so? And Tartuffe?

Dorine: Oh, he’s prodigiously well—bursting with health.

Orgon: Poor dear fellow!

Dorine: At supper that evening Madame was so ill that she could 
not touch a morsel.

Orgon: Ah—and Tartuffe?

Dorine: He could manage no more than a brace of partridges and 
half a hashed leg of mutton.

Orgon: Poor dear fellow!

Dorine: Madame could get no sleep all that night, and we had to 
sit up with her till daybreak.

Orgon: Indeed. And Tartuffe?

Dorine: Oh, he went straight from the table to his bed, where, to 
judge by the sounds, he slept on sweetly till the morning was 
well advanced.

Orgon: Poor dear fellow!

Dorine: But at last we persuaded Madame to let herself be bled, 
which gave her relief at once.

Orgon: Good! And Tartuffe?

Dorine: He bore up bravely, and at breakfast next morning drank 
four cups of red wine to replace what Madame had lost.

Orgon: Poor dear fellow!

Dorine: So all is now well with both of them, Monsieur, and, with
your leave, I will now go and let Madame know you are returned.

ORGON: Do so, Dorine.

DORINE: [As she reaches arch at back] I will not fail to tell her how concerned you were to hear of her illness, Monsieur. [She goes off]

ORGON: [To Cléante] I could almost think she meant some impertinence by that.

CLÉANTE: And if she did, my dear Orgon, is there not some excuse for her? Great heavens, man, how can you be so infatuated with this Tartuffe? What do you see in him that makes you indifferent to all others?

Obviously Orgon can't see the pit Tartuffe is digging for him. Molière unmistakably established his premise in the first third of the play.

Tartuffe has dug a pit; will Orgon fall into it? We don't know—and we're not supposed to know—until the end of the play.

Needless to say, the same principles govern a short story, novel, movie, or radio play.

Let us take Guy de Maupassant's short story, *The Diamond Necklace*, and try to find the premise in it.

Mathilda, a young, daydreaming, vain woman borrowed a diamond necklace from a wealthy schoolmate to wear to a ball. She lost the necklace. Afraid to face the humiliating consequences she and her husband mortgage their inheritance and borrow money to buy a replica of the lost necklace. They work for ten long weary years to repay their debt. They become coarse, work-worn, ugly and old. Then they discover that the original lost necklace had been made of paste.

What is the premise of this immortal story? We think it started with her daydreaming. A daydreamer is not necessarily a bad person. Daydreams are usually an escape from reality;—a reality which the dreamer has no courage to face. Daydreams are a substitute for action. Great minds are dream-
ers too, but they translate their dreams into reality. Nikola Tesla, for instance, was the greatest electrical wizard who ever lived. He was a great dreamer, but he was a great *doer* too.

Mathilda was a good-natured but idle dreamer. Her dreams led her exactly nowhere, until tragedy befell her.

We must examine her character. She lived in imaginary luxury in a fairy castle where she was a queen. Naturally she had a great deal of pride and couldn’t humiliate herself by admitting to her friend that she was unable to afford the price of the lost necklace. Death was preferable to that. She had to buy a new necklace even though she and her husband had to work the rest of their lives for it. They did. She became a drudge because of her vanity and false pride; inherent characteristics which were the result of her daydreaming. Her husband worked along with her because of his love for her. The premise: “Escape from reality leads to a day of reckoning.”

Let us find the premise in *A Lion Is in the Street*, a novel by Adria Locke Langley.

Even in early youth Hank Martin was determined to be the greatest of men. He peddled pins, ribbons, cosmetics, with the idea of ingratiating himself with people to use them later on. He did use them; so well that he became governor of his state. Then he plundered the people until the multitude rose up against him. He died a violent death.

Obviously the premise of this novel is: “Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction.”

Now for *Pride of the Marines*, a motion picture from a story by Albert Maltz.

This is the story of Al Schmid, wounded marine who became blind in the war. At the rehabilitation hospital they cannot induce him to go home to his fiancée. He feels that he is useless to her now. He was brought home by a ruse; his sweetheart convinces him that she still wants him and that, although blind he can still hold a job. He gets a job and they
plan to get married. Although the doctors have given up hope of his regaining his eyesight, he does begin to see a little.

Premise: “Sacrificial love conquers hopelessness.”

The pity of this otherwise promising motion picture is that Al Schmid and, for that matter, the other characters too, never find out what they were fighting for, and why Al lost his eyesight, even at the very end of the picture. Such knowledge would have deepened the story considerably.

_Earth and High Heaven_, a novel by Gwethalynn Graham, is the story of a wealthy Gentile Canadian girl who falls in love with a Jewish lawyer. Her father refuses to accept the young man and does everything in his power to break up the romance because of the man’s religion. Father and daughter had been devoted to each other. The girl must choose between her father or the man she loves. She decides to marry her sweetheart, thereby breaking off relations with her family.

Premise: “Intolerance leads to isolation.”

Not all of these examples are of high literary value, but they all have a clearly defined premise and this is a necessity in all good writing. Without it, it is impossible to know your characters. A premise has to contain; character, conflict and resolution. It is impossible to know all this without a clear-cut premise.

One more thing should be remembered. No one premise is necessarily a universal truth. Poverty doesn’t always lead to crime, but if you’ve chosen this premise, it does in your case. The same principle governs all premises.

The premise is the conception, the beginning of a play. The premise is a seed and it grows into a plant that was contained in the original seed; nothing more, nothing less. The premise should not stand out like a sore thumb, turning the characters into puppets and the conflicting forces into a mechanical set-up. In a well-constructed play or story, it is impossible to denote just where premise ends and story or character begins.
Rodin, the great French sculptor, had just finished the statue of Honoré de Balzac. The figure wore a long robe with long loose sleeves. The hands were folded in front.

Rodin stepped back, exhausted but triumphant, and eyed his work with satisfaction. It was a masterpiece!

Like any artist, he needed someone to share his happiness. Although it was four o'clock in the morning, he hastened to wake up one of his students.

The master rushed ahead with mounting excitement and watched the young man's reaction.

The student's eyes slowly focused upon the hands.

"Wonderful!" he cried. "What hands... Master, I've never seen such marvelous hands before!"

Rodin's face darkened. A moment later Rodin swept out of his studio again. A short while later he returned with another student in tow.

The reaction was almost the same. As Rodin watched eagerly, the pupil's gaze fastened on the hands of the statue and stayed there.

"Master," the student said reverently, "only a God could have created such hands. They are alive!"

Apparently Rodin had expected something else, for once more he was off, now in a frenzy. When he returned he was dragging another bewildered student with him.

"Those hands... those hands..." the new arrival exclaimed, in the same reverent tone as the others, "if you had never done anything else, Master, those hands would make you immortal!"

Something must have snapped in Rodin, for with a dismayed cry he ran to a corner of the studio and grabbed a fearful looking axe. He advanced toward the statue with the apparent intention of smashing it to bits.

Horror stricken, his students threw themselves upon him, but in his madness he shook them off with superhuman
strength. He rushed to the statue and with one well aimed blow, chopped off the magnificent hands.

Then he turned to his stupefied pupils, his eyes blazing.

"Fools!" he cried. "I was forced to destroy these hands because they had a life of their own. They didn't belong to the rest of the composition. Remember this, and remember it well: no part is more important than the whole!"

And that's why the statue of Balzac stands in Paris, without hands. The long loose sleeves of the robe appear to cover the hands, but in reality Rodin chopped them off because they seemed to be more important than the whole figure.

Neither the premise nor any other part of a play has a separate life of its own. All must blend into an harmonious whole.
II

CHARACTER

1. The Bone Structure

In the previous chapter we showed why premise is necessary as the first step in writing a good play. In the following chapters we shall discuss the importance of character. We shall vivisect a character and try to find out just what elements go into this being called “man.” Character is the fundamental material we are forced to work with, so we must know character as thoroughly as possible.

Henrik Ibsen, speaking of his working methods, has said:

When I am writing I must be alone; if I have eight characters of a drama to do with I have society enough; they keep me busy; I must learn to know them. And this process of making their acquaintance is slow and painful. I make, as a rule, three casts of my dramas, which differ considerably from each other. I mean in characteristics, not in the course of the treatment. When I first settle down to work out my material, I feel as if I have to get to know my characters on a railway journey; the first acquaintance is struck up, and we have chatted about this and that. When I write it down again, I already see everything much more clearly, and I know the people as if I had stayed with them for a month at a watering place. I have grasped the leading points of their characters and their little peculiarities.

What did Ibsen see? What did he mean when he said, “I have grasped the leading points of their characters and their
little peculiarities." Let us try to discover the leading points not only in one, but in all characters.

Every object has three dimensions: depth, height, width. Human beings have an additional three dimensions: physiology, sociology, psychology. Without a knowledge of these three dimensions we cannot appraise a human being.

It is not enough, in your study of a man, to know if he is rude, polite, religious, atheistic, moral, degenerate. You must know why. We want to know why man is as he is, why his character is constantly changing, and why it must change whether he wishes it or no.

The first dimension, in the order of simplicity, is the physiological. It would be idle to argue that a hunchback sees the world exactly opposite from a perfect physical specimen. A lame, a blind, a deaf, an ugly, a beautiful, a tall, a short person—each of these sees everything differently from the other. A sick man sees health as the supreme good; a healthy person belittles the importance of health, if he thinks of it at all.

Our physical make-up certainly colors our outlook on life. It influences us endlessly, helping to make us tolerant, defiant, humble, or arrogant. It affects our mental development, serves as a basis for inferiority and superiority complexes. It is the most obvious of man's first set of dimensions.

Sociology is the second dimension to be studied. If you were born in a basement, and your playground was the dirty city street, your reactions would differ from those of the boy who was born in a mansion and played in beautiful and antiseptic surroundings.

But we cannot make an exact analysis of your differences from him, or from the little boy who lived next door in the same tenement, until we know more about both of you. Who was your father, your mother? Were they sick or well? What was their earning power? Who were your friends? How did you influence or affect them? How did they affect you? What kind of clothes do you like? What books do you read? Do you
go to church? What do you eat, think, like, dislike? Who are you, sociologically speaking?

The third dimension, psychology, is the product of the other two. Their combined influence gives life to ambition, frustration, temperament, attitudes, complexes. Psychology, then, rounds out the three dimensions.

If we wish to understand the action of any individual, we must look at the motivation which compels him to act as he does. Let us look first at his physical make-up.

Is he sick? He may have a lingering illness that he knows nothing of, but the author must know about it because only in this way can he understand the character. This illness affects the man’s attitude toward things about him. We certainly behave differently during illness, convalescence, and perfect health.

Does a man have big ears, bulging eyes, long hairy arms? All these are likely to condition him to an outlook which would affect his every action.

Does he hate to talk about crooked noses, big mouths, thick lips, big feet? Perhaps it is because he has one of these defects. One human being takes such a physical liability with resignation, another makes fun of himself, a third is resentful. One thing is certain, no one escapes the effect of such a shortcoming. Does this character of ours possess a feeling of dissatisfaction with himself? It will color his outlook, quicken his conflict with others, or make him sluggish and resigned. But it will affect him.

Important as this physical dimension is, it is only part of the whole. We must not forget to add the background for this physical picture. These two will round out each other, unite, and give birth to the third dimension, the mental state.

A sex pervert is a sex pervert, as far as the general public is concerned. But to the psychologist he is the product of his background, his physiology, his heredity, his education.
If we understand that these three dimensions can provide the reason for every phase of human conduct, it will be easy for us to write about any character and trace his motivation to its source.

Analyze any work of art which has withstood the ravages of time, and you will find that it has lived, and will live, because it possesses the three dimensions. Leave out one of the three, and although your plot may be exciting and you may make a fortune, your play will still not be a literary success.

When you read drama criticisms in your daily papers you encounter certain terminology time and again: dull, unconvincing, stock characters (badly drawn, that is), familiar situations, boring. They all refer to one flaw—the lack of tridimensional characters.

Don't believe, when your play is condemned as "familiar," that you must hunt for fantastic situations. The moment your characters are rounded, in terms of the three dimensions, you will find that they are not only exciting theater, but novel as well.

Literature has many tridimensional characters—Hamlet, for instance. We not only know his age, his appearance, his state of health; we can easily surmise his idiosyncrasies. His background, his sociology, give impetus to the play. We know the political situation at the time, the relationship between his parents, the events that have gone before and the effect they have had upon him. We know his personal premise, and its motivation. We know his psychology, and we can see clearly how it results from his physical and sociological make-up. In short, we know Hamlet as we can never hope to know ourselves.

Shakespeare's great plays are built on characters: Macbeth, King Lear, Othello, and the rest are striking examples of tridimensionality.

(It is not our intention here to go into a critical analysis of
famous plays. Suffice it to say that in every case the author created characters, or intended to. How he succeeded, and why, will be analyzed in another chapter.)

Euripides' Medea is a classical example of how a play should grow out of character. The author did not need an Aphrodite to cause Medea to fall in love with Jason. It was the custom of those times to show the interference of the gods, but the behavior of the characters is logical without it. Medea, or any woman, will love the man who appeals to her, and will sometimes make sacrifices hard to believe.

Medea had her brother slain for her love. Not long ago, in New York, a woman lured her two children into a forest, cut their throats, poured gasoline over them and burned them—for love. There is no indication of the supernatural in this. It is merely the good old-fashioned mating instinct run riot. If we knew the background and the physical composition of this modern Medea, her terrible deed would become comprehensible to us.

Here is a guide, then, a step-by-step outline of how a tridimensional-character bone structure should look.

**PHYSIOLOGY**

1. Sex
2. Age
3. Height and weight
4. Color of hair, eyes, skin
5. Posture
6. Appearance: good-looking, over- or underweight, clean, neat, pleasant, untidy. Shape of head, face, limbs.
8. Heredity

**SOCIOLoGY**

1. Class: lower, middle, upper.
2. Occupation: type of work, hours of work, income, con-
dition of work, union or nonunion, attitude toward organization, suitability for work.

3. **Education**: amount, kind of schools, marks, favorite subjects, poorest subjects, aptitudes.

4. **Home life**: parents living, earning power, orphan, parents separated or divorced, parents' habits, parents' mental development, parents' vices, neglect. Character's marital status.

5. **Religion**

6. **Race, nationality**

7. **Place in community**: leader among friends, clubs, sports.

8. **Political affiliations**

9. **Amusements, hobbies**: books, newspapers, magazines he reads.

**PSYCHOLOGY**

1. **Sex life, moral standards**

2. **Personal premise, ambition**

3. **Frustrations, chief disappointments**

4. **Temperament**: choleric, easygoing, pessimistic, optimistic.

5. **Attitude toward life**: resigned, militant, defeatist.

6. **Complexes**: obsessions, inhibitions, superstitions, phobias.

7. **Extrovert, introvert, ambivert**

8. **Abilities**: languages, talents.

9. **Qualities**: imagination, judgment, taste, poise.

10. **I.Q.**

This is the bone structure of a character, which the author must know thoroughly, and upon which he must build.

**QUESTION**: How can we fuse these three dimensions into a unity?

**ANSWER**: Take the kids in Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End*, for instance. All but one are physically well. There are no ap-
parently serious complexes resulting from physical deficiencies. In their lives, then, environment will be the deciding factor. Hero worship; lack of education, of clothing, of supervision; and, above all, the constant presence of poverty and hunger will shape their views of the world, and, as a consequence, their attitude and conduct toward society. The three dimensions have combined to produce one outstanding trait.

**Question:** Would the same environment produce the same reaction on each child, or will it affect them differently as they differ from each other?

**Answer:** No two individuals react identically, since no two are the same. One boy may have no mental reservations: he looks upon his juvenile crimes as preparation for a glorious career as a gangster; another participates in the mob activities from a sense of loyalty, or from fear, or to build up a reputation for courage. Still another is aware of the danger of his course, but sees no other way out of poverty. Minute physical differences between the individuals, and their psychological development, will influence their reactions to the same sociological conditions. Science will tell you that no two snowflakes have ever been discovered to be identical. The slightest disturbance in the atmosphere, the direction of the wind, the position of the falling snowflake, will alter the pattern. Thus there is endless variety in their design. The same law governs us all. Whether one's father is always kind, or only kind occasionally, or kind but once, or never kind, will profoundly affect one's development. And if the paternal kindness coincided with one's happiest and most contented moments, it might pass unrecognized. Every move hinges upon the peculiar circumstances of the given moment.

**Question:** There are certain human manifestations which do not appear to fall into the three categories. I've noticed in myself periods of depression, or excitement, which seem
unmotivated. Being observant, I’ve tried to track down the source of these mysterious disturbances, without success. I can truthfully say that these periods sometimes occurred when I had no economic stress or mental anxiety. Why are you laughing?

**Answer:** You remind me of a friend of mine—a writer—who told me a strange story about himself. The incident occurred when he was thirty years old. He was apparently healthy; he had won recognition for his work; he earned more money than he knew what to do with; he was married and loved his wife and two children dearly. One day, to his utter astonishment, he realized that he didn’t give a hoot about what was going to happen to his family, his career, or his life. He was bored to distraction. Nothing under the sun interested him; he anticipated everything his friends said and did. He couldn’t stand the same horrible routine day after day, week after week; the same woman, the same food, the same friends, the same murder stories in the papers day in and day out. They almost drove him mad. It was as mysterious as your case. Perhaps he had ceased to love his wife? He had thought of that, and was desperate enough to experiment. He did but with no success. He found no difference in his love. He was honestly and truly bored with life. He stopped writing, stopped seeing his friends, and finally decided that he’d be better off dead. The thought did not come in a moment of despair. He reasoned it out coolly, without missing a heartbeat. The earth had gone on for billions of years before his birth, he mused, and would go on after his demise. What difference could it make if he left a little before his appointed time?

So he sent his family away to a friend’s home and sat down to write his last letter, explaining his course of action to his wife. It was not an easy letter to write. It did not sound convincing, and he sweated over it as he had never done over his plays. Suddenly he felt a sharp, abdominal
cramp. There was a stabbing pain, persistent, excruciating. He found himself in an awkward situation. He wanted to kill himself, but it was idiotic to die with an ache in the stomach. Besides, he had to finish his letter.

He decided that the sensible thing would be to take a cathartic and ease the pain. He did so. When he went back to his desk again to finish his last epistle, he found it harder to write than ever. The reasons he had marshaled previously sounded fantastic to him—even stupid. He became aware of the brilliant sunshine which played over his desk, of the alternate light and shadow on the houses across the street. The trees had never seemed so green and refreshing; life had never seemed so desirable. He wanted to see, smell, feel, walk.

**Question:** Do you mean to say that he had entirely lost his desire to die?

**Answer:** Precisely. He found himself minus a clogged-up body and plus a million reasons to live. He really was a new man.

**Question:** Then physical conditions can really influence the mind so completely as to mean the difference between life and death?

**Answer:** Ask your family doctor.

**Question:** It seems to me that not every reaction of the mind or body springs from a physical or economic cause. I know cases—

**Answer:** We know cases, too. Let's say X falls in love with a desirable girl. His love is unrequited, so he feels frustrated, becomes despondent, and winds up seriously ill. But how can this be? Love, according to many, is ethereal, outside the pale of economy or mere materialism. Shall we investigate? Love, like all emotions, originates in the brain. Brain, however one looks at it, is composed of tissue, cells, blood vessels. This is purely physical. The slightest physical disturbance registers first on the brain, which re-
acts instantaneously. A serious disappointment has its effect on the brain—the physical brain—which transmits the message to the body. Remember that love, however ethereal, affects such physical functions as digestion and sleeping.

**QUESTION:** But suppose the emotion isn’t physical at all? Suppose there aren’t any factors like desire in it?

**ANSWER:** All emotion has physical effects. Let us take what is supposed to be the noblest emotion of them all—mother love. This particular mother has no financial difficulties. She has plenty of money, she’s healthy, she’s happy. Her daughter falls in love with a young man whom the mother considers a liability rather than an asset. He is not dangerous in any way, merely unsuitable from the mother’s point of view. But the daughter runs away with him.

The mother’s first reaction will be shock, followed by bitter disappointment. Then will come shame, self-pity. All of these might usher in an attack of hysteria. These attacks increase in frequency and kind, weaken the resistance of the body, and culminate in actual illness—even invalidism.

**QUESTION:** Is all psychological reaction the result of your three dimensions?

**ANSWER:** Let us see. Why did the mother object so strenuously to the daughter’s choice of husband? His appearance? Perhaps, although the average mother hides her disappointment when her son-in-law is not an Adonis. Unless he is actually a monster, his appearance should not cause a violent reaction. But in any case, the mother’s disapproval of his appearance would have been conditioned by her own background, by what her father looked like, her brothers, her favorite motion-picture star.

Another source of disappointment—and a more probable one—would be the young man’s financial status. If he cannot support her daughter well, or at all, the mother
will be a prey to fear for her daughter and for herself. Even if she can afford to keep her daughter from poverty, she cannot keep her friends from sneering at the poor match. She may have to set the boy up in business—only to find him a poor businessman who may lose all her savings. Or perhaps the young man is handsome, and financially stable, and of another race? All of the mother's training will rise up against him. She will have a host of memories springing up from her past: warnings of social ostracism, of mythical differences between the races, of superstitions and chauvinism completely without foundation.

Think of any reason you like, from the young man's physical state through the birthplace of his great-grandfather, and you will find that anything to which the mother objects has a physical or sociological foundation, both in him and in her. Try as you will, you must come back to the three dimensions.

**QUESTION:** Might not this principle of tridimensionality limit the scope of material for the writer?

**ANSWER:** On the contrary. It opens up undreamed-of perspectives and an entirely new world for exploration and discovery.

**QUESTION:** You mentioned height, age, skin coloring, in your outline of a character's bone structure. Must all these be incorporated in our play?

**ANSWER:** You must know all of these, but they need not be mentioned. They come through in the behavior of the character, not in any expository material about him. The attitude of a man who is six feet in height will differ considerably from that of a man who measures four feet, eight inches. And the reaction of a woman with a pock-marked face will not be the same as that of a girl famed for her lovely complexion. You must know what your character is, in every detail, to know what he will do in a given situation.

Anything that happens in your play must come directly
from the characters you have chosen to prove your premise, and they must be characters strong enough to prove the premise without forcing.

2. Environment

When a friend invites you to a party, and after a moment's hesitation you reply, "All right, I'll be there," you are making an unassuming statement. But that statement is the result of a complicated mental process.

Your acceptance of the invitation may have sprung from loneliness, from a desire to avoid a dull evening, from excess physical energy, from desperation. You may have felt that mingling with people would bring forgetfulness of a problem, or new hope, or inspiration. The truth, however, is that even such a simple matter as saying "yes" or "no" is the product of elaborate reviewing, reshifting, reevaluating of fancied or real, mental or physical, economic or sociological conditions around us.

Words have a complex structure. We use them glibly, without realizing that they too are compounds of many elements. Let us vivisect the word "happiness," for instance. Let us try to discover what elements go into the making of complete happiness.

Can a person be "happy" if he has everything but health? Obviously not, since we refer to utter happiness, happiness without reservations. So health must be put down as a necessary element for "happiness."

Can a person be "happy" with nothing but health? Hardly. One may feel joy, exuberance, freedom, but not happiness. Remember that we are speaking of happiness in its purest form. When you exclaim, "Boy, how happy I am!" upon receiving a long-desired gift, what you are experiencing is not happiness. It is joy, fulfillment, surprise, but not happiness.
Then we are not daring too much if we say that a man needs, besides health, a job in which he can make a comfortable living. We shall take it for granted that the man is not abused on his job, for that would negate the possibility of his being happy. The ingredients for happiness, so far, are health and a satisfactory position.

But can a man be happy who possesses both of these and no warm, human affection? There need be little argument on this point. A man needs someone whom he can love and who loves him in return. So let us add love to the other requirements.

Would you be happy if your position, although satisfactory, held no chance for advancement? Would a good job, health, and love suffice, if the future held for you no hope of development, of improvement? We don't think so. Perhaps your position will never change, but you can be happy in the hope that it will. Let us therefore add hope to our list of ingredients.

Our recipe now reads: health, a satisfactory position, love, and hope equal happiness. Further subdivisions might be made, but the four main ingredients are enough to prove that a word is the product of many elements. Of course, the meaning of the word "happiness" will go through innumerable metamorphoses, according to the place, climate, conditions, under which it is used.

Protoplasm is one of the simplest of living substances, yet it contains carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, sulphur, phosphorus, chlorine, potassium, sodium, calcium, magnesium, iron. Simple protoplasm, in other words, contains the same elements as complex man.

We referred to protoplasm as "simple," in comparing it with man. Yet protoplasm is complex, compared with inanimate things. It occupies both a high and a low place on the scale of complexity. Contradictory? No more so than anything
else in nature. The principle of contradiction and tension makes motion possible, and life is motion, essentially.

What would have happened to the protoplasm at the beginning of time as we know it, if it had not possessed motion? Nothing. It could not have existed and life would have been impossible. Through motion higher forms of life developed, the specific form being determined by the place, climate, type of food, abundance of food, light or lack of light.

Give a person all the elements required for life, but alter one of them—heat, let us say, or light—and you will completely change his life. If you doubt this, you can experiment on yourself. Let us suppose that you are happy, that you have all the four necessary elements. Bandage your eyes for twenty-four hours. Close out all light. You are still healthy, still employed, still loved and loving, still hopeful. Moreover, you know that after twenty-four hours you will remove the bandages. You are not really blind, you are merely refraining from sight at your own will. Yet that experiment will change your entire attitude.

You will find the same thing to be true if you stop hearing for one day, or temporarily deprive yourself of the use of one limb. Eat any one food you like and nothing else, for months—even for a couple of weeks. What do you think your reaction will be? You'll loathe that food the rest of your life.

Would it make a great difference in your life if you were forced to sleep in a bug-infested, foul room, on a dirty floor, with only a few rags for covering or a mattress? Undoubtedly. Even if you lived in foul surroundings for only a day, it would multiply your appreciation of cleanliness and comfort.

It seems that human beings react to environment exactly as the original one-celled creatures did when they changed their shape, color, and species under the pressure of environment.

We are forcing this point strenuously because it is of the utmost importance that we understand the principle of change
in character. A character is in constant change. The smallest disturbance of his well-ordered life will ruffle his placidity and create a mental upheaval, just as a stone which slides through the surface of a pond will create far-reaching rings of motion.

If it is true that every man is influenced by his environment, health, and economic background, as we have tried to prove, then it is evident that, since everything is in a process of constant change (environment, health, and economic background, naturally, being part of everything), the man too will change. As a matter of fact, he is the center of this constant movement.

Don't forget a fundamental truism: everything is changeable, only change is eternal.

Take, for instance, a prosperous businessman—a drygoods merchant. He is happy. His business is on the upgrade. His wife, his three children are also contented. It is a rare case, in fact, an almost impossible case, but it will illustrate our point. As far as he and his family are concerned, this man is contented. Then a big industrialist somewhere starts a movement to cut wages and destroy unions. It seems to our man that this is a wise thing to do. The worker, he thinks, has become too uppish lately. Why, if things continue at the rate workers wish, they may very well take over industry and ruin the country. Since our man has something to lose, he feels that he and his family are in danger.

A slow but persistently growing uneasiness steals over him. He is profoundly disturbed. He reads more about this grave problem. He may or may not know that his fear is being created by a few rich industrialists who wish to cut wages and are spending fabulous sums to spread panic over the country. Our man is caught in this web of propaganda. He wants to do his share in saving his nation from destruction. He cuts wages, unaware that by this act he has not only antagonized his employees, but has helped a movement which will prove
a boomerang in the end, and may even destroy his own livelihood. With the reduction of purchasing power, which he has caused, his business may be one of the first to suffer.

Our man will suffer even if he knows what it is all about and does not cut wages. He will be caught in the reaction to his fellow employers' wage cutting. Changing conditions will mold him, whether or not he wants to be molded, and they will affect his family with him. He can't give them as much money as he did, because the source of easy money has dried up. This will precipitate some dissension among the members of the family and may even cause an eventual split.

A war in Europe or China, a strike in San Francisco, Hitler's attack on the democracies, will affect us as surely as if we had been at the scene. Every human event comes home, at long last, to roost. We find to our sorrow, perhaps, that even seemingly unrelated things are very much related to each other—and to us.

There is no escape—for our drygoods merchant or anyone else.

Banks and governments are as subject to change as the rest of us. We saw this in the 1929 depression. Countless millions of dollars were lost. After the First World War, government after government toppled, and new governments or new systems took their places. Your money, your investments, were swept away overnight, and your security with them. You, as an individual, are only as secure as the rest of the world is under prevailing circumstances.

A character, then, is the sum total of his physical make-up and the influences his environment exerts upon him. Look at the flowers. It makes a great difference in their development if they receive the morning sun, the midday sun, or the afternoon sun.

Our minds, no less than our bodies, respond to external influences. Early memories are so deep-rooted that we are often unconscious of them. We can make determined efforts
to rid ourselves of past influences, to escape from our instincts, but we remain in their grip. Unconscious recollections color our judgment regardless of how fair we try to be.

Woodruff says, in Animal Biology:

It is impossible to consider protoplasm except in connection with its surroundings, whatever they may be, variations in its environment and variations in its activities being reflected directly or indirectly in its appearance.

Watch women walking in the rain under their colored umbrellas, and you'll notice that their faces reflect the color of the umbrellas they carry. Our own childhood recollections, memories, experiences, become an indelible part of us and will reflect upon and color our minds. We cannot see things otherwise than this reflection permits us to see them. We may argue against this coloration, we may put up a conscious fight against it, we may even act against our natural inclinations, but we still reflect all we represent.

Life is change. The smallest disturbance alters the pattern of the whole. The environment changes, and man with it. If a young man meets a young lady under the right circumstances, he may be drawn to her by their common interest in literature, or the arts, or sports. This common interest toward a subject may deepen until they feel fondness and sympathy. The sympathy grows, and before they realize it, it will be attachment, which is deeper than sympathy or fondness. If nothing disturbs this harmony, it will become infatuation. Infatuation is not yet love, but it approaches love as it moves on to the stage of devotion and then to rapture, or adoration which is already love. Love is the last stage. It can be tested by sacrifice. Real love is the capacity to endure any hardship for the beloved.

The emotions of two people might follow this course if everything worked out just right; if nothing interferes with
their budding romance, they may marry and live happily ever after. But suppose that when this same young couple reaches the stage of attachment, a malignant gossiper informs the young man that the lady in question had an affair before she knew him. If the young man had a bad experience before, he will shy away from the young woman. From attachment he will change to coolness, from coolness to malice, from malice to antipathy. If the girl is defiant and not sorry for the past, antipathy might ripen into bitterness, and bitterness to detestation. On the other hand, if the mother of the same young man had an experience like this young lady's, and became a better wife and mother in consequence, then the young man's attachment might grow into love much more quickly than otherwise.

This simple love affair is subject to any number of variations. Too much or too little money will influence its course. A steady or insecure job will do the same. Health or sickness may speed up or slow down love's consummation. The financial and social status of either family may affect the courtship for better or worse. Heredity may upset the applecart.

Every human being is in a state of constant fluctuation and change. Nothing is static in nature, least of all man.

As we pointed out before, a character is the sum total of his physical make-up and the influences his environment exerts upon him at that particular moment.

3. The Dialectical Approach

What is dialectics? The word comes to us from the old Greeks who used it to mean a conversation or dialogue. Now, the citizens of Athens regarded conversation as a supreme art—the art of discovering truth—and contested against one another to find the best conversationalist, or dialectician. Above all other Greeks, Socrates stands out as most perfect.
We may read some of his conversations in Plato's *Dialogues*, which yield us, on close study, the secret of his art. Socrates discovers truth by this process: he states a proposition, finds a contradiction to it, and, correcting it in the light of this contradiction, finds a new contradiction. This continues indefinitely.

Let us look further into this method. Movement of the conversation is secured by three steps. First, statement of the proposition, called *thesis*. Then the discovery of a contradiction to this proposition, called *antithesis*, being the opposite of the original proposition. Now, resolution of this contradiction necessitates correction of the original proposition, and formulation of a third proposition, the *synthesis*, being the combination of the original proposition and the contradiction to it.

These three steps—thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—are the law of all movement. Everything that moves constantly negates itself. All things change toward their opposites through movement. The present becomes the past, the future becomes the present. There is nothing which does not move.

Constant change is the very essence of all existence. Everything in time passes into its opposite. Everything within itself contains its own opposite. Change is a force which impels it to move, and this very movement becomes something different from what it was. The past becomes the present and both determine the future. New life arises from the old, and this new life is the combination of the old with the contradiction which has destroyed it. This contradiction that causes the change goes on forever.

A human being is a maze of seeming contradictions. Planning one thing, he at once does another; loving, he believes he hates. Man oppressed, humiliated, beaten, still professes sympathy and understanding for those who have beaten, humiliated, and oppressed him.

How can we explain these contradictions?
Why does the man you befriend turn against you? Why does son turn against father, daughter against mother?

A boy runs away from home because his mother insists that he sweep their dingy, two-room apartment. He hates sweeping. But he is quite content with a job as assistant janitor in a big house—his main function being to sweep the halls and street. Why?

A twelve-year-old girl marries a fifty-year-old man—and is sincerely happy. A thief becomes a worthy citizen, a wealthy gentleman becomes a thief. The daughter of a respectable and religious family crashes into the underworld and prostitution. Why?

On the surface, these examples are part of a riddle, part of the so-called “mystery of life.” But they can be explained, dialectically. It is a Herculean task, but not an impossible one if we remember that without contradiction there would be no motion and no life. Without contradiction there would be no universe. Stars, moon, earth would not exist—nor would we. Hegel said: *

It is only because a thing contains a contradiction within itself that it moves and acquires impulse and activity. That is the process of all motion and all development.

Adoratsky, in his *Dialectics*, writes:

The general laws of dialectics are universal: they are to be found in the movement and development of the immeasurable, vast, luminous nebulae from which in the spaces of the universe the stellar systems are formed . . . in the internal structure of molecules and atoms and in the movement of electrons and protons.

Zeno, in the fifth century B.C., was father of dialectics. Adoratsky quotes Zeno’s demonstrations:

An arrow, in the course of its flight, is bound to be at some definite point of its path and occupy some definite place. If that be so, then

*The Science of Logic.*
at each given moment it is at a definite point in a state of rest, that is, motionless; hence, it is not moving at all. We therefore see that motion cannot be expressed without resorting to contradictory statements. The arrow is at a given place, yet at the same time is not in that place. It is only by expressing both these contradictory affirmations coincidentally that we can depict motion.

Let us stop here and freeze a human being into immobility. Let us analyze thoroughly the girl who left a religious home to become a prostitute. It is not enough to say that certain forces caused her degeneration. There were forces, of course, but what were they? Did some supernatural guidance move her? Did she honestly find prostitution alluring? Hardly. She had read about it, heard from her parents, from the pastor of her church, that prostitution is one of the worst evils in society, full of uncertainty, disease, horror. She knew that a prostitute is hunted by the law, fleeced by pimps, taken advantage of by clients and masters alike, and finally left to die a lonely, miserable death.

It is almost impossible that a normal, well-bred girl would wish to become a prostitute. Yet this one did become a prostitute—and others have.

To understand the dialectical reasons for this girl's action we must know her thoroughly. Only then can we perceive the contradictions within and without her, and through these contradictions, the movement which is life.

Let us call this girl Irene; here is the bone structure of Irene's character.

PHYSIOLOGY

Sex: Female.
Age: Nineteen.
Height: Five feet, two inches.
Weight: 110 pounds.
Color of hair: Dark brown.
Color of eyes: Brown.
Skin: Fair.
Posture: Straight.
Appearance: Attractive.
Neat: Yes, very.
Health: She had an appendix operation when she was fifteen.
She is susceptible to colds, and the whole family is morbidly afraid that she will become tubercular. She is seemingly unconcerned, but actually she is convinced that she will die young, and wishes to enjoy life while she can.
Birthmarks: None.
Abnormalities: None, if we overlook her hypersensitivity.
Heredity: A weak constitution, from her mother.

SOCIOLOGY

Class: Middle class. Her family lives in comfort. Father has a general store, but of late competition has been making his life miserable. He fears that he will be frozen out by younger people. This fear is eventually proved valid, but he would never burden his family with it.

Occupation: None. Irene is supposed to help around the house, but she prefers to read and let the burden fall on her seventeen-year-old sister, Sylvia.

Education: High school. She wanted to drop out in the second year, but her parents' insistence and outright threats made her finish the course somehow. She never liked school or study. She had no comprehension of mathematics or geography, but she liked history. The bravery, love affairs, betrayals, fascinated her. She read history profusely, but not as nonfiction. Dates and names were unimportant, and only the glamour mattered. Her memory was not retentive, and her sloppy working habits led to constant conflict with her teachers. Her physical neatness was not reflected in her untidy, misspelled compositions. Graduation was the happiest day of her life.

Home life: Both her parents are alive. Her mother is about
forty-eight, her father, fifty-two. They married late. Her mother’s life was fairly turbulent. She had a love affair lasting two and a half years, at the end of which time the man ran away with another woman. She tried to kill herself. Her brother caught her in the act of taking gas. She had a nervous breakdown and was sent to an aunt to recuperate. She stayed there a year, regained her health, and met the man who is now her husband. They became engaged, although she did not love him. Her contempt for men made her indifferent to the identity of the man she married. He, on the other hand, was a plain-looking man, proud that such a pretty girl should consent to marry him. She never told him of her affair with the other man, but did not worry about his finding out. He never did, since he cared nothing about her past. He loved her although she made a very poor wife at first.

After Irene’s birth, she changed completely. She took interest in her household, her child, and even in her husband. But now her gall bladder, which has troubled her for years, will never be cured without an operation. She has become nervous and irritable. She no longer reads as she once did—not even a newspaper. She had only an elementary-school education and dreamed that Irene would go to college. But her daughter’s abhorrence of learning frustrated this ambition.

Her bringing up was sadly neglected, and she attributes her early misstep to her parents’ negligence. As a result, she exercises close supervision over Irene’s every step. This leads to constant squabbling between mother and daughter. Irene hates supervision, but her mother insists it is not only her prerogative but her sacred duty.

Irene’s father is of Scotch descent. He is frugal, but will go to any length to satisfy his family’s needs. Irene is his pet. He worries about her health and often takes her
part in her squabbles with her mother. He knows that
his wife means well, however, and agrees that Irene
should be looked after. He took over his father's store
when his parents died, and became sole owner. He, too,
went only to elementary school. He reads the local paper,
the *Courier*. His parents were Republican, so he too is a
Republican. If questioned, he could not give any reason
for his beliefs. He believes firmly in God and country.
He is a simple man with simple tastes. He makes a mod-
est, annual contribution to the church and is highly re-
spected in the community.

*I.Q.*: Irene is low normal.

*Religion*: Presbyterian. Irene is agnostic, when she thinks of
religion at all. She's too preoccupied with herself.

*Community*: She belongs to a singing society and the "Moon-
light Sonata Social Club," where young people congre-
gate to dance and play games. Sometimes the games de-
gerante into outright petting parties. Irene is admired
for her grace. She is a good dancer—nothing more. The
praises she absorbs here give rise to a desire to go to New
York and be a dancer. Of course, when Irene mentions
this to her mother, an hysterical scene occurs. Mother's
desire to squelch Irene's ambition arises from her fears
of what a free life in the city might do to Irene's morals
and, to a lesser extent, to Irene's delicate health. The girl
never dares mention the matter again.

Irene is not particularly popular with girls, due to a
certain delight she takes in malicious gossip.

*Political affiliations*: None. Irene never could figure out the
difference between the Republican and Democratic par-
ties and was not aware that there were any others.

*Amusements*: Motion pictures, dancing. She is mad about
dancing. She smokes secretly.

*Reading*: Pulp magazines: love stories, romance, screen news.
PSYCHOLOGY

Sex life: She had an affair with Jimmy, a club member. Her fears that some dire fate would overtake her proved groundless. Now she does not go with him, because he flatly refused to marry her when she thought herself in trouble. She was not very much disappointed at his refusal, since her favorite plan is to go to New York and be a chorus girl. Dancing before an admiring public is the apex of her dreams.

Morality: "There is nothing wrong with any sexual relationship if you can take care of yourself."

Ambition: Dancing in New York. For over a year she has been putting aside her pin money. If everything else fails, she will run away. She's glad Jimmy refused to marry her. She can't picture herself as a domesticated wife whose main function is childbearing. She feels that Plainsville would be a terrible place to die in and is unspeakable for living purposes. She was born in the town and knows every stone in it. She feels that even if she fails as a dancer, just being out of Plainsville will make her happy.

Frustration: She has had no dancing lessons. There is no studio in town, and to have sent her to another town would have entailed more expense than her father could meet. She has worn a tragic halo about her head and let the family know that she is sacrificing her life for their good.

Temperament: Quick-tempered. The slightest provocation will send her into a rage. She is vengeful and boasting. But when her mother was ill, she astounded the town by her devotion. She insisted on being with her until she had completely recovered. When Irene was fourteen, her canary died, and she was inconsolable for weeks.

Attitude: Militant.

Complexes: Superiority complex.

Superstitions: Number thirteen. If something unpleasant hap-
pens on a Friday, something unpleasant will happen during the week.

*Imagination:* Good.

The *thesis* in this case will be the desire of the parents to marry off Irene as advantageously as possible.

The *antithesis* will be Irene’s intention of not marrying at all, but of being a dancer at any cost.

The *synthesis* will be the resolution: Irene’s running away and eventually finding herself on the streets.

**SYNOPSIS**

Irene, instead of going to the singing society, has been going out with a young man. A girl, meeting Irene’s mother on the street, asks, casually, why Irene has dropped out of the group. The mother can barely hide her shock, but explains that Irene has not been well lately. At home, there is a terrible interview. Mother suspects that Irene is no longer a virgin and wishes to marry her off as quickly as possible to a clerk in her father’s store. Irene is aware of her mother’s determination. She decides to run away and accomplish her ambition. She finds no employment in the theater and, having no profession with which to earn a living, she soon succumbs to pressing necessity and turns to prostitution.

There are thousands of girls who run away from thousands of homes. Naturally, they do not all become prostitutes—because their physical, mental, and sociological make-ups differ in a thousand ways from each other and from Irene. Our synopsis is only one version of how a girl from a respectable home becomes a prostitute.

Suppose a hunchback had been born into the same family. That would never create the type of conflict Irene does. A deformed person would do something else in a pinch. Our character must have a good figure to think of being a dancer. Irene is intolerant; a humble or appreciative person would be
systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human
nature, and not its growth and development.

—Oscar Wilde, Soul of Man under Socialism

Regardless of the medium in which you are working, you
must know your characters thoroughly. And you must know
them not only as they are today, but as they will be tomorrow
or years from now.

Everything in nature changes—human beings along with
the rest. A man who was brave ten years ago may be a coward
now, for any number of reasons: age, physical deterioration,
changed financial status, to name a few.

You may think you know someone who never has changed,
and never will. But no such person has ever existed. A man
may keep his religious and political views apparently intact
through the years, but close scrutiny will show that his con-
victions have either deepened or become superficial. They
have gone through many stages, many conflicts, and will con-
tinue to go through them as long as the man lives. So he does
change, after all.

Even stone changes, although its disintegration is imper-
ceptible; the earth goes through a slow but persistent trans-
formation; the sun, too, the solar system, the universe. Na-
tions are born, pass through adolescence, achieve manhood,
grow old, and then die, either violently or by gradual disso-
lution.

Why should man, then, be the only thing in nature which
never changes? Preposterous!

There is only one realm in which characters defy natural
laws and remain the same—the realm of bad writing. And it
is the fixed nature of the characters which makes the writing
bad. If a character in a short story, novel, or play occupies the
same position at the end as the one he did at the beginning,
that story, novel, or play is bad.

A character stands revealed through conflict; conflict be-
gins with a decision; a decision is made because of the prem-
ise of your play. The character’s decision necessarily sets in motion another decision, from his adversary. And it is these decisions, one resulting from the other, which propel the play to its ultimate destination: the proving of the premise.

No man ever lived who could remain the same through a series of conflicts which affected his way of living. Of necessity he must change, and alter his attitude toward life.

Even a corpse is in a state of change: disintegration. And while a man is arguing with you, attempting to prove his changelessness, he is changing: growing old.

So we can safely say that any character, in any type of literature, which does not undergo a basic change is a badly drawn character. We can go further and say that if a character cannot change, any situation in which he is placed will be an unreal situation.

Nora, from *A Doll’s House*, who starts as Helmer’s “scatterbrain” and “singing bird,” becomes a grown-up woman at the end of the play. She begins as a child, but the terrible awakening catapults her into maturity. First she is bewildered, then shocked, then about to do away with herself, and finally she revolts.

Archer says:

In all modern drama, there is perhaps no character who “develops,” in the ordinary sense of the word, so startlingly as Ibsen’s *Nora*.

Look at any truly great play, and you will see the same point illustrated. Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*, Euripides’ *Medea*, all’build upon the constant change and development of character under the impact of conflict.

*Othello* starts with love, ends with jealousy, murder, and suicide.

*The Bear* starts with animosity, ends with love.

*Hedda Gabler* starts with egotism, ends with suicide.
Macbeth starts with ambition, ends with murder.
The Cherry Orchard starts with irresponsibility, ends with loss of property.
Excursion starts with the longing to fulfill a dream, ends with awakening to reality.
Hamlet starts with suspicion, ends with murder.
Death of a Salesman starts with illusions, ends in painful knowledge.
Dead End starts with poverty, ends with crime.
The Silver Cord starts with domination, ends in dissolution.
Craig’s Wife starts with overscrupulousness, ends with loneliness.
Waiting for Lefty starts with uncertainty, ends with conviction.
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof starts with frustration, ends with hope.
The Iceman Cometh starts with hopefulness, ends in despair.
Career starts with hopelessness, ends in success and triumph.
Raisin in the Sun starts with despair, ends with understanding and new values.

All these characters move relentlessly from one state of mind toward another; they are forced to change, grow, develop, because the dramatists had a clear-cut premise which it was their function to prove.

When a person makes one mistake, he always follows up with another. Usually the second mistake grows out of the first and the third from the second. Orgon, in Tartuffe, made the grievous mistake of taking Tartuffe into his home, believing in his saintliness. The second mistake was entrusting Tartuffe with a small box containing papers “which, if they were brought to light might, for aught I know, cost my friend all his estate, and—if he were caught—his head.”
Orgon believed in Tartuffe so far, but now, by putting this box in his care, Orgon jeopardizes a human life. Orgon's growth from trust to admiration is obvious, deepening with every line.

**TARTUFFE:** It is well hidden. [*The box*] You may feel easy concerning it. As *I* do.

**ORGON:** My best friend! What you have done is beyond all thanks. It has knit us even closer together than before.

**TARTUFFE:** Nothing could do that.

**ORGON:** One thing could, as I have just seen, if it could but be accomplished.

**TARTUFFE:** A dark saying, brother. Expound it, I pray you.

**ORGON:** You said a while ago that my daughter needed a husband who could keep her footsteps from straying.

**TARTUFFE:** I did. And I cannot think that a worldling such as M. Valere—

**ORGON:** Nor I. And this has lately been borne in upon me—she could have no safer, tenderer guide through the pitfalls of this life than *you*, beloved friend.

**TARTUFFE:** [*Who is genuinely taken back for the moment*] Than *I*, brother? Oh, no. No!

**ORGON:** What? Would you refuse to be my son-in-law?

**TARTUFFE:** It is an honor to which I have never dreamed of aspiring. And—and—I have some cause to think that I have found no favor in the eyes of Mlle Mariane.

**ORGON:** That matters little if she has found favor in *yours*.

**TARTUFFE:** Eyes that are fixed on Heaven, brother, have no regard for the beauty that perisheth.

**ORGON:** True, brother, true—but would you hold that a reason for refusing a bride who is not without comeliness?

**TARTUFFE:** [*Who is uncertain how a marriage with Mariane would assist his designs on Elmire*] I would not say so. Many saintly men have wedded comely maidens and sinned not. But—to be plain with you—I fear that a marriage with your daughter might not be altogether pleasing to Madame Orgon.

**ORGON:** What if it be not? She is only her stepmother, and her con-
sent is not needed. I might add that Mariane will bring her husband an ample dowry, but that I know will not weigh with you.

TARTUFFE: How should it?
ORGON: But what, I hope, will weigh with you is that by declining her hand you would disappoint me grievously.

TARTUFFE: If I thought that, brother—
ORGON: More than that, I should feel that you did not think such an alliance worthy of you.

TARTUFFE: It is I who am unworthy. [He decides to take the risk]
But, rather than you should so misjudge me, I will—yes, I will overcome my scruples.

ORGON: Then you consent to be my son-in-law?
TARTUFFE: Since you desire it, who am I that I should say you nay?
ORGON: You have made me a happy man again. [He rings handbell]
I will send for my daughter and tell her what I have arranged for her.

TARTUFFE: [Going toward his door right] Meanwhile I will crave your permission to retire. [At door] If I may offer my counsel, it will be better, in laying this matter before her, to dwell less on any poor merits of my own than on your wishes as a father. [He goes in]

ORGON: [To himself] What humility!

Orgon’s third mistake is in trying to force his daughter to marry this scoundrel. His fourth mistake is in deeding his whole estate to Tartuffe to manage. He sincerely believes that Tartuffe will save his wealth from his family, who, he thinks, wants to squander it. This is his most grievous mistake. He has sealed his own doom. But the ridiculousness of this deed is only a natural outgrowth of his first mistake. Yes, Orgon grows perceptibly from blind belief to disillusionment. The author achieved this with step-by-step development in his character.

When you plant a seed, it seems for a while to lie dormant. Actually, moisture attacks it immediately, softening the shell of the seed so that the chemical inherent in the seed, and those which it absorbs from the soil, may cause it to sprout.
The soil above the seed is hard to push through, but this very handicap, this resistance to the soil, forces the young sprout to gather strength for the battle. Where shall it get this additional strength? Instead of fighting ineffectively against the topsoil, the seed sends out delicate roots to gather more nourishment. Thus the sprout at last penetrates the hard soil and wins through to the sun.

According to science, a single thistle needs ten thousand inches of root to support a thirty- or forty-inch stem. You can guess how many thousands of facts a dramatist must unearth to support a single character.

By way of parable, let a man represent the soil; in his mind we shall plant a seed of coming conflict: ambition, perhaps. The seed grows in him, though he may wish to squelch it. But forces within and without the man exert greater and greater pressure, until this seed of conflict is strong enough to burst through his stubborn head. He has made a decision, and now he will act upon it.

The contradictions within a man and the contradictions around him create a decision and a conflict. These in turn force him into a new decision and a new conflict.

Many kinds of pressures are required before a human being can make a single decision, but the three main groups are the physiological, the sociological, and the psychological. From these three forces you can make innumerable combinations.

If you plant an acorn, you reasonably expect an oak sapling, and eventually an oak tree. Human character is the same. A certain type of character will develop on his own line to fruition. Only in bad writing does a man change without regard to his characteristics. When we plant an acorn we would be justified in expecting an oak tree and shocked (at the very least) if it turned out to be an apple tree.

Every character a dramatist presents must have within it the seeds of its future development. There must be the seed,
or possibility, of crime in the boy who is going to turn criminal at the end of the play.

Although Nora, in *A Doll’s House*, is loving, submissive, and obedient, there is in her the spirit of independence, rebellion, and stubbornness—a sign of possible growth.

Let us examine her character. We know that at the end of the play she is not only going to leave her husband, but her children as well. In 1879 that was an almost unheard-of phenomenon. She had little, if any, precedent to go by. She must have had within her that something, *at the beginning of the play*, which develops into the independent spirit she has at the end. Let us see what this something was.

When the play opens, Nora enters, humming a tune. A porter follows with a Christmas tree and a basket.

PORTER: Sixpence.
NORA: There is a shilling. No, keep the change.

She has been trying to save every penny to pay off her secret debt—yet still she is generous. Meanwhile she is eating macaroons, which she is not supposed to have. They are not good for her, and she has promised Helmer that she will not eat sweets. So the first sentence she says shows us that she is not close with money, and the first thing she does shows her breaking a promise. She is childlike.

Helmer enters:

HELMER: Has my little spendthrift been wasting money again?
NORA: Yes, but Torvald, we may be a wee bit more reckless now, mayn’t we?

(Helmer cautions her. It will be a whole quarter before he receives his salary. Nora cries out like an impatient child: “Pooh! We can borrow till then!”)

HELMER: Nora! *He is appalled at her featherheadedness. He resents this “borrow.”* Suppose, now, that I borrowed fifty pounds
today, and you spent it all in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve a slate fell on my head and killed me, and . . .

(Just like Helmer. He would not be at peace, even in the grave, with one unpaid debt on his conscience. He is certainly a stickler for propriety. Can you imagine his reaction if he were to discover that Nora had forged a name?)

Nora: If that were to happen, I don't suppose I should care whether I owed money or not. [She has been kept in perpetual ignorance of money matters, and her reaction is imperious. Helmer is tolerant, but not enough to forgo a lecture.]

Helmer: . . . There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt. [At this Nora is very discouraged. It seems that Helmer will never understand her.]

The two characters have been sharply drawn. They are facing each other—clashing already. No blood has been drawn yet, but it inevitably will come.

(Loving her as he does, Helmer now shifts the responsibility to her father.)

Helmer: You're an odd little soul. Very like your father. You always find some new way of wheedling money out of me, and, as soon as you have got it, it seems to melt in your hands. . . . Still, one must take you as you are. It is in the blood; for indeed it is true that you can inherit these things, Nora.

(With a master stroke Ibsen has sketched in Nora's background. He knows her ancestry better than she does. But she loves her father, and is not slow to answer: "Oh, I wish I had inherited many of Papa's qualities."

Right after this she lies shamelessly about having eaten the macaroons, like a child who feels that the prohibitions set down by her elders are necessarily senseless. There is no great harm in this lying, but it shows what material Nora is made of.)
NORA: I should not think of going against your wishes.
HELMER: No, I am sure of that; besides, you gave me your word.

(Life and Helmer's business have schooled him to think that a given word is sacred. Here again, an insignificant thing shows Helmer's lack of imagination, his complete inability to realize that Nora is anything but what she seems to be on the surface. He is unaware of what goes on behind his back at home. Every penny that Nora wheedles out of him goes to the money-lender, to pay off the debt she has incurred.

Nora is living a double life at the beginning of the play. The forgery was committed long before the play opened, and Nora has been hugging her secret to herself, calm in the knowledge that her deed was a heroic sacrifice to save Helmer's life.)

NORA: [Talking to her schooltime friend, Mrs. Linde] But it was absolutely necessary that he should not know! My goodness, can't you understand that? It was necessary he should have no idea what a dangerous condition he was in. It was to me that the doctors came and said his life was in danger and that the only thing to save him was to live in the South. ... I even hinted that he might raise a loan. That nearly made him angry, Christine. He said I was thoughtless and that it was his duty as my husband not to indulge me in my whims. ... Very well, I thought, you must be saved—and that was how I came to devise a way out of the difficulty.

(Ibsen takes his time about starting the main conflict. Very precious time is consumed by the scene in which Nora confesses to Mrs. Linde what she did for Helmer. There is something too coincidental about Mrs. Linde's visit at this opportune moment, and also Krogstad's visit. But we are not discussing Ibsen's deficiencies here. We are tracing the completeness of Nora's development. Let us see what else we can learn about her.)

MRS. LINDE: Do you mean never to tell him about it? [the forgery]
NORA: [Meditatively, and with a half-smile] Yes, someday, perhaps, after many years, when I am no longer as nice-looking as I am now. [This throws an interesting light on Nora’s motive. She expects gratitude for her deed.] Don’t laugh at me! I mean, of course, when Torvald is no longer as devoted to me as he is now, when my dancing and dressing up and reciting have palled on him, then it may be a good thing to have something in reserve.

(Now we can surmise the tremendous shock Nora is in for when Helmer denounces her as a bad wife and mother, instead of praising her. This, then, will be the turning point in her life. Her childhood will die a miserable death, and with a shock she will see, for the first time, the hostile world about her. She has done everything in her power to make Helmer live and be happy, and when she needs him most he will turn against her. Nora has all the necessary ingredients for growth in one direction. Helmer, too, acts in accordance with the character Ibsen has given him. Listen to his storm of impotent rage after learning of the forgery.)

HELMER: What a horrible awakening! All these eight years—she who was my joy and pride—a hypocrite, a liar—worse—worse—a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all! For shame! For shame! [“Nora is silent and looks at him steadily. He stops in front of her.” These are Ibsen’s stage directions. Nora is looking at Helmer with horror, seeing a strange man, a man who forgets her motive and thinks only of himself.] I ought to have suspected that something of the sort would happen. I ought to have foreseen it, all your father’s want of principle—be silent!

(Apparently Nora’s sociological background helped Ibsen draw her mind. Her physiological make-up helped, too—she is aware of her beauty, mentions it several times. She knows she has many admirers, but they mean nothing to her until she makes up her mind to leave.)

HELMER: All your father’s want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no sense of duty.
All these things are discernible in Nora’s character at the beginning of the play. She has brought upon herself everything that happened. These things were in her character and they necessarily directed her actions. Nora’s growth is positive. We can watch her irresponsibility change to anxiety, her anxiety to fear, her fear to desperation. The climax leaves her at first numb, then she slowly understands her position. She makes her final, irrevocable decision, a decision as logical as the blooming of a flower, a decision which is the result of steady, persistent evolution. Growth is evolution; climax is revolution.

Let us trace the seed of possible growth in another character—Romeo. We want to know if he possesses the characteristics which will lead him to the inevitable end.

Romeo, in love with Rosalind, is walking around in a daze, when on the street he meets one of his relatives, Benvolio, who accosts him.

BENVOLIO: Good morning, cousin.
ROMEO: Is the day so young?
BENVOLIO: But now struck nine.
ROMEO: Ay me! Sad hours seem long.
   Was that my father that went hence so fast?
BENVOLIO: It was. What sadness lengthens Romeo’s hours?
ROMEO: Not having that which, having, makes them short.
BENVOLIO: In love?
ROMEO: Out.
BENVOLIO: Of love?
ROMEO: Out of her favor, where I am in love.

Romeo bitterly complains that his ladylove has “not been hit with Cupid’s arrow.”

She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair,
To merit bliss by making me despair:
She hath forsworn to love; and in that vow
Do I live dead, that live to tell it now.
Benvolio advises him to "examine other beauties," but Romeo cannot be consoled.

He that is stricken blind cannot forget
The previous treasure of his eyesight lost:

Farewell: thou canst not teach me to forget.

But later, through a queer coincidence, he learns that his beloved Rosalind will be in the house of his family's deadly enemy, the Capulets, where they are entertaining guests. He decides to go, defying death, to steal, if only a glance, at his love. And there, among the guests, he beholds a lady so enchanting that he has no eyes for Rosalind and breathlessly asks a servingman:

What lady's that, which doth enrich the hand of yonder knight?

SERVANT: I know not, sir.

ROMEO: O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear;
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
The measure dove, I'll watch her place of stand,
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.
Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight!
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

And with this decision his die is cast.

Romeo is haughty, impetuous. Finding that his true love is the daughter of the Capulets, he does not hesitate to storm this citadel of hate where murderous intent is constant against him and his family. He is impatient, brooks no contradiction. His love for the fair Juliet has made him still more high-strung. For his love, he is willing even to humble himself. No price is too great for his beloved Juliet.
If we consider his death-defying exploit—jeopardizing his life just to have a glance at Rosalind—then we may surmise what he is capable of doing for Juliet, the true love of his life.

No other type of man could have faced so much danger without flinching. The possible growth was inherent in his character from the very beginning of the play.

It is interesting to note that a certain Mr. Maginn in his Shakespeare Papers states that Romeo's hard luck throughout his life was attributable to the fact that he was “unlucky,” that had any other passion or pursuit occupied Romeo, he would have been as unlucky as in his love.

Mr. Maginn forgets that Romeo, like everyone else, acts as his character dictates. Yes, Romeo's downfall is inherent; it does not occur because he is “unlucky.” His impetuous temperament, which he cannot control, drives him to do what another person could easily have avoided.

His temperament, his background—in short, his character was the seed which ensured growth and proved the author's premise.

The important thing we wish the reader to remember is that Romeo was fashioned from that kind of stuff which made him what he was (impulsive, and so on) and forced him to do what he did later (murder and suicide). This characteristic was apparent in the first line uttered.

Another fine example of growth is found in Mourning Becomes Electra, by Eugene O'Neill. Lavinia, the daughter of a brigadier general, Ezra Mannon, and his wife Christine, says almost at the very beginning of the play, when a young man who loves her alludes to love:

LAVINIA: [Stiffening, brusquely] I don't know anything about love.
        I don't want to know anything. [Intensely] I hate love!

Lavinia is the pivotal character, and lives up to this statement throughout the play. Her mother's illicit love affair
made her what she became later—relentless, vengeful to death.

We have no intention of stopping anyone from writing a pageant or imitating the indefatigable Saroyan, who writes limping cadences to the beauty of life. Any of these things can be moving, even beautiful to behold. We wouldn’t eliminate Gertrude Stein, either, from the groaning arena of literature for the simple reason that we enormously enjoy her vagaries and her style (although, we confess, frequently we don’t know what she is talking about). From decay springs a new, vibrant life. Somehow these formless things belong to life. Without disharmony there could never be harmony. But some playwrights obviously write about character and want to build it into a well-constructed edifice, and when it turns out to be a pageant or a pseudo-Saroyan, they insist that we treat their work as a play. We can’t do that, no matter how hard we try, just as we can’t compare the mental capacity of a child to an Einstein.

Robert E. Sherwood’s Idiot’s Delight is such a work. Although it won the Pulitzer Prize, it is far from being a well-constructed play.

Harry Van and Irene are supposed to be the leading characters in this play, but we can’t discern any possible growth in them. Irene is a liar and Harry is a good-natured, happy-go-lucky fellow. Only at the end we see some growth, but then the play is over.

Lavinia, Hamlet, Nora, and Romeo, even without a magnificent production, are still characters; living, pulsating, dynamic personalities. They know what they want and fight for it. But poor Harry and Irene just amble around without a visible goal to pursue.

QUESTION: What do you mean, explicitly, when you say “growth”? 
ANSWER: For example, King Lear is ready to distribute his kingdom among his daughters. This is a blunder, and the play must prove to the audience that it is folly. It does this through showing the effect of Lear's action on himself, his "growth," or logical development, as a consequence of his mistake. First, he doubts that the power he gave his children is being misused. Then he suspects that it is. Then he is sure, and becomes indignant. He is furious, next, and flies into a rage. He is stripped of all authority and is shamed. He wishes to kill himself. In shame and grief, he goes mad, and dies.

He planted a seed which grew and bore the kind of fruit that seed was bound to bear. He never dreamed the fruit would be so bitter—but that is the result of his character, which caused his original mistake. And he pays the price.

QUESTION: Would his growth have been the same if he had chosen the right person—his youngest daughter—as the most trustworthy?

ANSWER: Naturally not. Each mistake—and its reaction upon him—grew from the mistake before it. If Lear had made the right choice in the first place there would have been no motivation for the later action. His first blunder was in deciding to invest his authority in his children. He knew this authority was great, coupled with the highest honor, and he never doubted the ready assurance from his daughters that they loved and revered him. He was shocked by the relative coolness of Cordelia and so made his second mistake. He asked for words rather than deeds. Everything that happened thereafter grew from these roots.

QUESTION: Weren't his mistakes simply stupidity?

ANSWER: Yes, but don't forget that all blunders—yours and mine—are stupid after they are made. At the time they may grow out of pity, generosity, sympathy, understanding. What we term stupid at the last may have been a beautiful gesture at the first.
“Growth” is a character’s reaction to a conflict in which he is involved. A character can grow through making the correct move, as well as the incorrect one—but he must grow, if he is a real character.

Take a couple. They are in love. Leave them for a while, and they may produce the elements of a drama. Perhaps they drift apart, and there is conflict between them; perhaps their love grows deeper, and conflict comes from outside. If you ask, “Does real love deepen through adversity?” or if you say, “Even a great love suffers in adversity,” your characters will have a goal to achieve, and a chance to grow to prove the premise. The proving of a premise indicates growth on the part of the characters.

II

Every good play grows from pole to pole.

Let us examine an old motion picture and see whether or not this is true.

“Professor Mamlock”

(He will go from Isolation, Pole I, to Collective Action, Pole II)

STEP 1. Isolation. He was unconcerned under the Nazi tyranny. He was an outstanding personality; he felt above politics. He never dreamed that anyone could harm him, although he saw terror all around.

STEP 2. Nazi power reaches into his own class and tortures his colleagues. He starts to worry. But he still doesn’t believe that anything can happen to him. He sends away friends who beg him to escape.

STEP 3. At last, he senses that a tragic fate might smash him, as it did others. He calls his friends, and rationalizes that he had been justified in being an isolationist. He still is not ready to give up the ship.
STEP 4. Fear grips him. At last he realizes that his previous stand was sheer blindness.

STEP 5. He wishes to escape, but doesn’t know how or where to turn.

STEP 6. He becomes desperate.

STEP 7. He joins common struggle against Nazism.

STEP 8. He becomes a member of the underground organization.


Let us now take Nora and Helmer from *Doll’s House*.

**NORA:** *From:* submissive, happy-go-lucky, naïve, trusting  
*To:* cynical, independent, adult, bitter, disillusioned

**HELMER:** *From:* bigoted, domineering, sure of himself, practical, precise, patronizing, conventional, ruthless  
*To:* bewildered, unsure, disillusioned, dependent, submissive, weak, tolerant, considerate, confused

III

**HATRED TO LOVE**

*Before curtain*  
1. Insecurity  
2. Humiliation  
3. Resentment  
4. Fury  

*Curtain*  
5. Hatred  
6. Causing injury  
7. Satisfaction  
8. Remorse  
9. Humility  
10. False generosity  
11. Reevaluation  
12. Real generosity  
13. Sacrifice  
14. Love
LOVE TO HATRED

Before curtain
1. Possessive love
2. Disappointment
3. Doubt
4. Questioning

Curtain
5. Suspicion
6. Testing
7. Hurt
8. Realization
9. Bitterness
10. Reevaluation and failure to adjust
11. Anger
12. Fury (at self)
13. Fury (at object)
14. Hate

5. Strength of Will in a Character

A weak character cannot carry the burden of protracted conflict in a play. He cannot support a play. We are forced, then, to discard such a character as a protagonist. There is no sport if there is no competition; there is no play if there is no conflict. Without counterpoint there is no harmony. The dramatist needs not only characters who are willing to put up a fight for their convictions. He needs characters who have the strength, the stamina, to carry this fight to its logical conclusion.

We may start with a weak man who gathers strength as he goes along; we may start with a strong man who weakens through conflict, but even as he weakens he must have the stamina to bear his humiliation.

Here is an example, in O’Neill’s Mourning Becomes Electra. Brant is talking to Lavinia. He is the illegitimate child of a servant girl and an almighty Mannon. He is an outcast, as far as the Mannons are concerned, and his mother brought him up in a distant place. But now he has returned,
under an assumed name, to avenge the humiliation his mother and he have undergone. He is a captain, and he makes love to Lavinia to hide his affair with her mother. But Lavinia’s servant puts her on her guard.

(Brant tries to take her hand, but at his touch she pulls away and springs to her feet.)

LAVINIA: [With cold fury] Don’t touch me! Don’t you dare! You liar! You—I! [Then, as he starts back in confusion, she seizes this opportunity to follow Seth’s (the servant’s) advice—staring at him with deliberately insulting scorn] But I suppose it would be foolish to expect anything but cheap romantic lies from the son of a low Canuck nurse girl.

BRANT: [Stunned] What’s that? [Then, rage at the insult to his mother overcoming all prudence, springs to his feet threateningly] Belay, damn you—or I’ll forget you’re a woman. No Mannon can insult her while I—

LAVINIA: [Appalled now she knows the truth] So it is true—you are her son! Oh!

BRANT: [Fighting to control himself—with harsh defiance] And what if I am? I’m proud to be! My only shame is my dirty Mannon blood! So that’s why you couldn’t stand my touching you just now, is it? You’re too good for the son of a servant, eh? By God, you were glad enough before—!

These characters are vital, full of fight, and they will easily carry the play to a crescendo. Brant has been planning his revenge for a long time, and now, when it is almost within his grasp, he is thwarted. At this point the conflict ripens into a crisis. We are really eager to know what he is going to do when he is unmasked. Unfortunately, O’Neill bungles and distorts his characters in this play—but more about this in our analysis of plays.

Martha, one of the dead soldiers’ wives, is speaking in Irwin Shaw’s Bury the Dead:
MARTHA: A house should have a baby. But it should be a clean house with a full icebox. Why shouldn't I have a baby? Other people have babies. They don't have to feel their skin crawl every time they tear a page off the calendar. They go off to beautiful hospitals in lovely ambulances and have babies between colored sheets. What's there about them that God likes that he makes it so easy for them to have babies?

WEBSTER: [One of the soldiers] They're not married to mechanics.

MARTHA: No! It's not eighteen-fifty for them. And now—now it's worse. Your twenty dollars a month. You hire yourself out to be killed and I get twenty dollars a month. I wait on line all day to get a loaf of bread. I've forgotten what butter tastes like. I wait on line with the rain soaking through my shoes for a pound of rotten meat once a week. At night I go home. Nobody to talk to, just sitting watching the bugs, with one little light because the government's got to save electricity. You had to go off and leave me to that! What's the war to me that I have to sit at night with nobody to talk to? What's the war to you that you had to go off and—

WEBSTER: That's why I'm standing up now, Martha.

MARTHA: What took you so long, then? Why now? Why not a month ago, a year ago, ten years ago? Why didn't you stand up then? Why wait until you're dead? You live on eighteen-fifty a week, with the roaches, not saying a word, and then when they kill you, you stand up! You fool!

WEBSTER: I didn't see it before.

MARTHA: Just like you! Wait until it's too late! There's plenty for live men to stand up for! All right, stand up! It's about time you talked back. It's about time all you poor, miserable, eighteen-fifty bastards stood up for themselves and their wives and the children they can't have! Tell 'em all to stand up! Tell 'em! Tell 'em! [She shrieks. Blackout.]

These characters, too, are pulsating with fighting strength; whatever they do, they'll force opposite wills to clash.

Go through all great dramas and you will find that the characters in them force the issue in question until they are beaten or reach their goal. Even Chekhov's characters are so strong
in their passivity that the accumulated force of circumstance has a hard time crushing them.

Some weakness which seems inconsequential may easily provide the starting point of a powerful play.

Look at *Tobacco Road*. Jeeter Lester, the central figure, is a weak-kneed man, without the strength to live or die successfully. Poverty stares him in the face, his wife and children starve, and he twiddles his thumbs. No catastrophe is great enough to move him. This weak, useless man has phenomenal strength in waiting for a miracle; he can cling tenaciously to the past, he can ignore the fact that the present offers a new problem to be solved. He laments endlessly the great injustice done him in the past—it is his pet theme, yet he does nothing to correct it.

Is he a weak or a strong character? To our way of thinking he is one of the strongest characters we have seen in the theater in a long time. He typifies decay, disintegration, and still he is strong. This is a natural contradiction. Lester stubbornly maintains his *status quo*, or *seems* to maintain it, against the changes of time. Even to put up a noticeable fight against natural laws requires tremendous strength, and Jeeter Lester has that strength, although ever-changing conditions will liquidate him as they have liquidated all things which could not adapt themselves. Jeeter and the dinosaur are of one spirit.

Jeeter Lester represents a class: the dispossessed small farmers. Modern machinery, the accumulation of wealth in a few hands, competition, taxes, assessments have put him and his class out of business. He will not organize with the dispossessed because he is unaware of the value of organization. Because his ancestors never organized, he lives in miserable isolation, ignorant of the outside world. He is stubborn in his ignorance. His tradition is against change. But in his weakness he is exceptionally strong, and condemns himself and his class to slow death rather than change. Yes, Jeeter Lester is a strong man.