Can anyone imagine a sweeter and weaker character than the classic mother? Can one forget her eternal vigilance, tender care, anxious warnings? She subordinates herself to one goal, the success of her child, sacrificing even her life, if necessary. Isn't your mother like that? Enough mothers are, to have built up a maternal tradition. Haven't you been haunted in your dreams, at least once, by your mother's smile, her sullen silence, her persistent admonitions, her tears? Haven't you, at least once, felt like a murderer in going against your mother's wishes? All the sins in the world, put together, have never made mankind into greater liars than their sweet mothers.

Seemingly weak, always ready to retreat and give in, yet almost always the winner in the end, such is Mother. You don't always know how you have been roped and tied, but you find that you have made a promise your mind rebels at breaking.

Are mothers weak? Emphatically no! Think of *The Silver Cord*, by Sidney Howard. Here is a mother wrecking the lives of her own children—not with brutality, but with sweet, weak words, with bitter tears, with seemingly ineffectual silence. In the end she ruined the lives of all about her. Is she weak?

Who, then, are the weak characters as opposed to the strong ones? They are those who have no power to put up a fight.

Jeeter Lester, for instance, is inactive in the face of starvation. To go hungry without doing anything about it is queer, to say the least. The man has stamina, even if it is misdirected. Self-preservation is a natural law, and it leads both animals and men to hunt, steal, and murder, to get food. Jeeter Lester disobeys this law. He has his tradition, he has his ancestral home. The property belongs to him as it did to his ancestors, and he feels that to run away from it in adversity would be cowardly. He thinks it is fortitude to take all the punishment he gets for the sake of what belongs to him. It may be that
basic laziness, even cowardice, has made him the tenacious man he is, but the resultant behavior is strong.

The truly weak character is the person who will not fight because the pressure is not strong enough.

Take Hamlet. He is persistent and with bulldog tenacity proves the facts of his father's death. He has weaknesses, else he would not have had to hide behind assumed insanity. His sensitivity is a drawback in his fight, yet he kills Polonius who he thinks is spying on him. Hamlet is a complete character, hence he is ideal material for a play, as is Jeeter. Contradiction is the essence of conflict, and when a character can overcome his internal contradictions to win his goal, he is strong.

The stool pigeon in Black Pit offers a good example of a weak, badly drawn character. He could never make up his mind what to do. The author wanted us to see the danger of compromise, but the audience felt sympathy and pity for the man they were supposed to despise.

The man was never really a stool pigeon. He was not defiant, but ashamed. He knew he was doing something wrong, but couldn't help it. On the other hand, he wasn't a class-conscious worker, because he was unfaithful to his class—and he could not do anything about that, either.

Where there is no contradiction there is no conflict. In this case the contradiction was ill-defined, as was the conflict. The man let himself be entangled in a web and lacked the courage to get out. His shame was not deep enough to force him into a decision—the only compromise—nor was his love for his family great enough to overcome all opposition and make him a stool pigeon in earnest. He could not make up his mind one way or the other, and such a person is incapable of carrying a play. We can now define a weak character in another way: "A weak character is one who, for any reason, cannot make a decision to act."

Is Joe, the stool pigeon, so inherently weak that he would have remained undecided under any conditions? No. If the
situation in which he finds himself is not pressing enough, it is the author’s duty to find a more clearly defined premise. Under greater pressure Joe would have reacted more violently than he did. It was not enough to arouse Joe that his wife would have to give birth to her child without a midwife. That was an everyday occurrence in his world, and most of the women survived.

But there is no character who would not fight back under the right circumstances. If he is weak and unresisting, it is because the author has not found the psychological moment when he is not only ready, but eager to fight. The point of attack was miscalculated. Or it might be put this way: a decision must be permitted to mature. The author may catch a character in a period of transition, when he is not yet ready to act. Many a character fails because the author forces him into action he is not ready to take, action he will not be ready to take for an hour, or a year, or twenty years.

We find this little item on the editorial page of The New York Times.

MURDER AND INSANITY

After studying some 500 murders, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company expresses in its Bulletin mild astonishment at the reasons. An irate husband beats his wife to death because dinner is not ready; one friend kills another over a matter of 25 cents; a lunchroom proprietor shoots a customer after an argument over a sandwich; a youth kills his mother because she upbraids him about his drinking; a barfly slashes another to death over a dispute as to who shall drop a nickel into a slot and play a mechanical piano first.

Were these people all mad? What could have motivated them to take human life over a pittance, for a grudge? Normal people do not commit such atrocities—perhaps they really were insane.
There is only one way to find out and that is to examine the physiological, sociological, and psychological make-up of a murderer in a case which, on the surface, is brutal and shocking.

Our man is fifty years old. He killed a man—stabbed him—because of a joke. Everyone thought him a vicious, unsocial creature, a beast. Let us see what he was.

The murderer's history shows that he was patient and harmless, a good provider, an excellent father, a respected citizen, an esteemed neighbor. He had worked as bookkeeper in one firm for thirty years. His employers found him honest, responsible, inoffensive. They were shocked when he was arrested for murder.

The groundwork for his crime began thirty-two years ago, when he was married. He was eighteen, and in love with his wife, although she was exactly his opposite in nature. She was vain, unreliable, flirtatious, untruthful. He had to close his eyes to her constant indiscretions, because he sincerely believed that she would someday change for the better. He never did anything decisive to stop her shameful behavior, although he threatened her now and again. But it remained only a threat.

A playwright, seeing him at this point, would have found him too weak and inoffensive to make a dramatic character. He felt the humiliation deeply, but he was powerless to do anything about it. There is no hint of what the man will become.

Years pass. His wife gives him three beautiful children, and he hopes that with advanced age she will finally change. She does. She becomes more careful, and seems really to settle down, to be a good wife and mother.

Then one day she disappears, never to return. At first, the poor man almost goes mad, but he recovers and takes over her duties around the house along with his work. He re-
ceives no thanks from his children for his sacrifice. They abuse him, and leave him at the first opportunity.

On the surface our man has been bearing all this stoically. Perhaps he is a coward, lacking the energy to resist or revolt. Perhaps he has superhuman energy and the courage to bear abuse and injustice.

Now he loses the house which was his pride. He is deeply moved and makes efforts to save it. But he cannot, and he is crushed, although not to the point where he would take drastic action. He is still the timid Milquetoast: changed, yes; bitter, yes; uneasy, yes. Looking for an answer, and not finding one, he is bewildered, alone. Instead of revolting, he becomes a recluse.

So far he's still not much good to a dramatist—he still has not made a decision.

Now only his job, which has lately become insecure, holds him to sanity. Then the last straw breaks his back. A younger man is put into the place where he slaved for thirty years. He is aroused to an unbelievable fury, for at last he has reached the breaking point. And when a man makes a harmless joke—about the depression, perhaps—he kills him. He murders for no apparent cause a man who never hurt him.

If you look hard enough, you will find that there is always a long chain of circumstances leading to a seemingly unmotivated crime. And these "circumstances" can be found in the criminal's physical, sociological, and mental make-up.

This is related to what has been said about miscalculation. An author must realize how vitally important it is to catch a character at the high point of mental development, a subject we'll discuss more fully when we speak of "Point of Attack." Suffice it to say here that every living creature is capable of doing anything, if the conditions around him are strong enough.
Hamlet is a different man at the end of the play from what he was at the beginning. In fact, he changes on every page—not illogically, but in a steady line of growth. We are all changing with every passing minute, hour, day, week, month, and year. The problem is to find the moment at which it is most advantageous for the playwright to deal with a character. What we call Hamlet’s weakness is his delay in taking a step (sometimes fatal) until he has full evidence. But his iron determination, his devotion to his cause, are strong. He makes a decision. Jeeter Lester, too, made a decision to stay, whether or not this decision was conscious. As a matter of fact, Jeeter’s will was unconscious—subconscious, let us say—whereas Hamlet’s determination to prove that the king murdered his father was conscious. Hamlet was acting in accordance with a premise he was aware of, while Lester stayed because he did not know what else to do.

The dramatist may use either type. This is the point at which inventiveness comes to the fore. The trouble starts when the author puts a Chekhovian character into a blood-and-thunder play, or vice versa. You cannot force a character to make a decision before he is good and ready. If you try that, you will find that the action is superficial and trite—it will not reflect the real character.

So as you see, there is really no such thing as weak character. The question is: did you catch your character at that particular moment when he was ready for conflict?

6. Plot or Character—Which?

What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.

—EMERSON

Despite the frequent quotations from Aristotle, and the work done by Freud on one of the three elements of a human being, character has not been given the penetrat-
ing analysis which scientists give the atom or the cosmic ray.

William Archer, in his *Playmaking, a Manual of Crafts-\textit{manship},* says:

... To reproduce character can neither be acquired nor regulated by theoretical recommendations.

We readily agree that “theoretical recommendations” are of no use to anyone—but what of concrete recommendation? While it is true that the seemingly inanimate objects are easier to examine, the involved, ever-moving character of man must also be analyzed—and the task is organized, made simpler, by recommendations.

Specific directions for character-drawing would be like rules for becoming six feet high. Either you have it in you, or you have it not,

says Mr. Archer. This is a sweeping, and unscientific, statement. And it has a familiar ring. It is, in essence, the answer that was given to Leeuwenhoek, inventor of the microscope; to Galileo, who was almost burned as a heretic when he said the earth moved. Fulton’s steamboat was received with derision. “It won’t move!” the crowds shouted, and when it did move they cried, “It won’t stop!”

Yet today cosmic rays are made to photograph and measure themselves.

“Either you have it in you, or you have it not,” says Mr. Archer, thus admitting that one man has the ability to draw character, to penetrate the impenetrable, whereas another has not. But if one man can do it, and if we know how he did it, can we not learn from him? One man does it by observation. He is privileged to see things which others pass by. Is it that these less fortunate men cannot see the obvious? Perhaps. When we read a bad play carefully, we are struck by the author’s ignorance of his characters; and when we read a good play carefully, we are struck by the wealth of information the writer displays. Then why may we not sug-
gest to the less-privileged playwright that he train his eye to see, and his mind to understand? Why may we not recommend observation?

If the "have-not" playwright has imagination, selectivity, writing ability, he will be a better man for learning consciously what the "have" playwright knows only by instinct.

How is it that even the genius who has it within his power to be six feet tall frequently misses the mark? Why is it that the man who once knew how to draw character now makes a fool of himself? Might it be because he relied solely upon his instinctive powers? Why shouldn't these powers work all the time? The privileged one either has the power in him or he has not.

We trust you will admit that any number of geniuses have written any number of bad plays—because they relied on an instinctive power which is, at best, a hit-or-miss affair. One is not supposed to conduct important business on a hunch, a feeling, a whim—one is supposed to act upon knowledge.

Mr. Archer's definition of character follows:

... for the practical purposes of the dramatist it may be defined as a complex of intellectual, emotional, and nervous habit.

This hardly seems enough, so we turn to Webster's International Dictionary. Perhaps Mr. Archer's words hold more than appeared on the surface.

Complex: composed of two or more parts; composite; not simple. Intellectual: apprehensible by intellect alone; hence of a spiritual nature; perceptible only to inspired vision or by spiritual insight.

Emotion: an agitation, disturbance, a tumultuous movement whether physical or social.

Now we know. It is so simple and so complex at the same time. Not much help, it's true, but refreshing, nevertheless.
It is not enough to know that a character consists of "complex intellectual, emotional, and nervous habit." We must know precisely what this "complex intellectual" means. We have found that every human being consists of three dimensions: physiological, sociological, and psychological. If we make a further breakdown of these dimensions, we shall perceive that the physical, social, and mental make-up contains the minute genes—the builder, the mover in all our actions which will motivate everything we do.

A shipbuilder knows the material he is working with, knows how well it can withstand the ravages of time, how much weight it can carry. He must know these things if he wishes to avoid disaster.

A dramatist should know the material he is working with: his characters. He should know how much weight they can carry, how well they can support his construction: the play.

There are so many conflicting ideas about character that it might be a good idea for us to review a few of them before we attempt to go further.


People find it curiously difficult to consider a story as something which is in the process of *becoming*: confusion on this point exists in all textbooks on playwriting, and is a stumbling block to all playwrights.

Yes, it is a stumbling block, because they start to build their house from the roof down, instead of starting with premise and showing a character in relation to his environment. Lawson says as much in his introduction:

A play is not a bundle of isolated elements: dialogue, characterization, etc., etc. It is a living thing, in which all of these elements have been fused.
This is true, but on the very next page he writes:

We can study the form, the outwardness of a play, but the inwardness, the soul, eludes our grasp.

It will elude us forever if we fail to understand a basic principle: the so-called “inwardness,” the seemingly unpredictable soul, is nothing more nor less than character.

Lawson's fundamental mistake is using dialectics upside down. He accepts Aristotle's basic error, “character is subsidiary to action,” and from this springs his confusion. It is vain for him to insist on a “social framework” when he puts the cart before the horse.

We contend that character is the most interesting phenomenon anywhere. Every character represents a world of his own, and the more you know of this person, the more interested you become. We have in mind just now George Kelly's Craig's Wife. It is far from being a well-constructed play but there is a conscious attempt to build character. Kelly shows us a world through the eyes of Craig's wife, a drab and monotonous world, but a real one.

George Bernard Shaw said that he was not governed by principle, but by inspiration. If any man, inspired or not, builds on character, he is going in the right direction and is employing the right principle, consciously or otherwise. The vital thing is not what the playwright says, but what he does. Every great literary work grew from character, even if the author planned the action first. As soon as his characters were created they took precedence, and the action had to be reshaped to suit them.

Let us suppose we were building a house. We started at the wrong end and it collapsed. We began again—at the top—and it collapsed. And so a third and a fourth time. But eventually we make it stand up, without the slightest idea of what change in our method was responsible for our suc-
cess. Can we now, without compunction, give advice on the construction of houses? Can we honestly say: it must collapse four times before it can stand?

The great plays came down to us from men who had unlimited patience for work. Perhaps they started their plays at the wrong end, but they fought themselves back inch by inch, until they made character the foundation of their work, although they may not have been objectively conscious that character is the only element that could serve as the foundation.

Says Lawson:

Of course it is hard to think of situations, and this depends upon the power of the writer's "inspiration".

If we know that a character embodies in himself not only his environment, but his heredity, his likes and dislikes, even the climate of the town where he was born, we do not find it hard to think of situations. **The situations are inherent in the character.**

George P. Baker quotes Dumas the Younger:

Before every situation that a dramatist creates, he should ask himself three questions: What should I do? What would other people do? What ought to be done?

Isn't it strange to ask everyone what should be done in a situation, except the character who created the situation? Why not ask him? He is in a position to know the answer better than anyone else.

John Galsworthy seems to have grasped this simple truth, for he claims that character creates plot, not vice versa. Whatever Lessing had to say about the matter, he built on character. So did Ben Jonson—in fact, he sacrificed many theatrical devices to bring his characters into sharper relief. Chekhov has no story to tell, no situation to speak of, but his plays are popular and will be so in time to come, because he per-
mits his characters to reveal themselves and the time in which they lived.

Engels says in *Anti-Dühring*:

Every organic being is at each moment both the same and not the same; at each moment it is assimilating matter drawn from without and excreting other matter; every moment the cells of its body are dying and new ones are being formed; in fact, within a longer or shorter period the matter of its body is completely removed and is replaced by other atoms of matter, so that every organic thing is at all times itself and yet something other than itself.

A character thus has the capacity to completely reverse himself under internal and external stimulus. Like every other organic being, he changes continuously.

If this is true, and we know it is true, how can one invent a situation, or a story, which is a static thing, and force it upon the character who is in a state of constant change?

Starting with the premise "Character is subsidiary to action," it was inevitable that the textbook writers should become confused. Baker quotes Sardou, who replied as follows to the question of how plays revealed themselves to him:

The problem is invariable. It appears as a kind of equation from which the unknown quantity must be found. The problem gives me no peace till I have found the answer.

Perhaps Sardou and Baker have found the answer, but they have not given it to the young playwright.

Character and environment are so closely interrelated that we have to consider them as one. They react upon each other. If one is faulty, it affects the other, just as the disease of one part of the body causes the whole to suffer.

The plot is the first consideration, and as it were, the soul of the tragedy. Character holds the second place,

writes Aristotle in his *Poetics*. 
Character comes in as subsidiary to the action. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy. . . . Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. . . . The drama interests us, not predominantly by its depiction of human nature, but primarily by the situations and only secondarily by the feelings of those therein involved.

After checking through volumes and volumes in search of the answer to which is more important, character or plot, we concluded that ninety-nine per cent of the writings on this issue are confused and barely understandable.

Consider this statement by Archer, in *Playmaking*:

A play can exist without anything that can be called character, but not without some sort of action.

But a few pages later:

Action ought to exist for the sake of character: when the relationship is reversed the play may be an ingenious toy, but scarcely a vital work of art.

To find the real answer is not an academic problem. It is an answer which will make a deep impression on the future of playwriting, since it is *not* the answer which was dictated by Aristotle.

We are going to take the oldest of all plots, a trite, worn-out triangle, a vaudeville skit, to prove our point.

A husband starts on a two-day trip, but forgets something and comes back to the house. He finds his wife in another man's arms. Let us suppose that the husband is a man of five feet three. The lover is a giant. The situation hinges on the husband—what will he do? If he is free of the author's interference, he will do what his character dictates, what his physical, social, and psychological make-up tell him to do.

If he is a coward, he may apologize, beg forgiveness for
his intrusion, and flee—grateful that the lover let him go unmolested.

But perhaps the husband's short stature has made him cocky, has forced him to be aggressive. He springs at the big man in a fury, unmindful that he may be the looser.

Perhaps he is a cynic, and sneers; perhaps he is imperturbable, and laughs; perhaps any number of things—depending on the character.

A coward might create a farce, a brave man might create a tragedy.

Take Hamlet, the brooding Dane, and let him—not Romeo—fall in love with Juliet. What would have happened? He might have contemplated the matter too long, muttering to himself beautiful soliloquies about the immortality of the soul and the deathlessness of love, which, like the phoenix, rises anew every spring. He might have consulted his friends, his father, to make peace with the Capulets, and while these negotiations went on, Juliet, not suspecting that Hamlet loved her, would have been safely married to Paris. Then Hamlet could have brooded still more and cursed his fate.

While Romeo runs into trouble with reckless abandon, Hamlet looks into the mechanism of his problem. While Hamlet hesitates, Romeo acts.

Obviously their conflicts grew out of their character, and not vice versa.

If you try to force a character into a situation where he does not belong, you will be like Procrustes who cut the feet off the sleeper to make him fit the bed.

Which is more important, plot or character? Let us trade the sensitive, brooding Hamlet for a pleasure-loving prince, whose one reason for living is the privileges his princehood affords him. Would he avenge his father's death? Hardly. He would turn the tragedy to comedy.

Let us trade the naïve Nora, ignorant of money matters,
forging a note for her husband, for a mature woman, aware of finance, too honest to let her love for her husband lead her astray. This new Nora would not have forged the note, and Helmer would have died then and there.

The sun, along with its other activities, creates rain. If it is true that the characters are secondary in importance, there is no reason why we should not use the moon instead of the sun. Do we get the same plot results? Emphatically: no!

Something will happen, however. The moon will witness the slow death of the earth, in place of the turbulent life created by the sun. We substituted only one character. This, of course, changed our premise and made a considerable alteration in the outcome of the play. With the sun: life. With the moon: death.

The inference is unmistakable: character creates plot, not vice versa.

It is not difficult to understand why Aristotle thought of character as he did. When Sophocles wrote Oedipus Rex, when Aeschylus wrote Agamemnon, when Euripides wrote Medea, Fate was supposed to have played the chief role in the drama. The gods spoke, and men lived or died in accordance with what they said. "The structure of the incidents" was ordained by the gods—the characters were merely men who did what had been prearranged for them. But, while the audience believed this, and Aristotle based his theories upon it, it does not hold true in the plays themselves. In all important Greek plays, the characters create the action. The playwrights substituted the Fates for the premise as we know it today. The results, however, were identical.

If Oedipus had been any other type of man, tragedy would not have befallen him. Had he not been hot-tempered, he would not have killed a stranger on the road. Had he not been stubborn, he would not have forced the issue of who killed Laius. With rare perseverance he dug out the smallest details, continuing because he was honest, even when the
accusing finger pointed at him. Had he not been honest, he would not have punished the murderer by blinding himself.

**CHORUS:** O doer of dread deeds, how couldst thou mar
Thy vision thus? What demon goaded thee?

**OEDIPUS:** Apollo, friends, Apollo, he it was
That brought these ills to pass;
*But the right hand that dealt the blow*
*Was mine, none other.*

Why should Oedipus blind himself if the gods had ordained that he should be punished anyway? They would certainly have taken care of their promise. But we know that he punished himself because of his rare character. He says:

*How could I longer see when sight*
*Brought no delight?*

A scoundrel would not have felt that way. He might have been exiled and the prophecy fulfilled—but that would have played havoc with the majesty of *Oedipus* as a drama.

Aristotle was mistaken in his time, and our scholars are mistaken today when they accept his rulings concerning character. Character was the great factor in Aristotle's time, and no fine play ever was or ever will be written without it.

Through Medea's conniving her brother was killed. She sacrificed him for the husband, Jason, who later brushed her aside to marry King Creon's daughter. Her grim deed brought its own poetic justice. What kind of man was it who would marry such a woman? Exactly the kind Jason proved to be—a ruthless betrayer. Both Jason and Medea were made of stuff that any playwright might envy. They stand on their own feet, without any help from Zeus. They are well drawn, tridimensional. They are constantly growing, which is one of the fundamental principles of great writing.

The Greek plays which have come down to us boast many extraordinary characters which disprove the Aristotelian
contention. If character were subsidiary to action, Agamemnon would not inevitably have died by the hand of Clytemnestra.

Before the action starts, in Oedipus Rex, Laius, King of Thebes, knew “of the prophecy that the child born to him by his queen, Jocasta, would slay his father and wed his mother.” So, when in time a son was born, the infant’s feet were riveted together and he was left to die on Mount Cithaeron. But a shepherd found the child and tended him and delivered him to another shepherd who took him to his master, the King of Corinth. When Oedipus learned of the prophecy, he fled to thwart the fulfillment of the Delphic oracle. In his wanderings he killed his father, Laius, without knowing his identity, and entered the kingdom of Thebes.

But how did Oedipus learn of the prophecy? At a banquet, he was told by a drunkard, “Thou art no true son of thy sire.” Disturbed, he sought to learn more.

So privily without their leave I went to Delphi, and Apollo sent me back, baulked of the knowledge that I came to seek.

Why did Apollo withhold the information Oedipus wanted?

But other grievous things he prophesied,
Woes, lamentations, mourning, portents dire,
To wit, I should defile my mother’s bed,
And raise seed too loathsome to behold.

It would seem that Apollo deliberately withheld the real identity of Oedipus’ father. Why? Because “Fate, as premise, drives the character to the inevitable end, and Sophocles needed that driving force. But let’s take it for granted that Apollo wished to make Oedipus flee, and at the end fulfill the prophecy. We shan’t ask the reasons for the dire fate of two innocent beings. Instead, let us go to the opening of the play and watch Oedipus’ character grow.
He was traveling incognito, a grown warrior, just and noble, fleeing to escape his fate. He was in no easy mood when he drew near the triple-branching road where the murder occurred. He says:

A herald met me and a man who sat  
In a car drawn by colts—as in the tale—  
The man in front and the old man himself  
Threatened to thrust me rudely from the path.

So they were rude to him and used force, and only then:

I struck him, and the old man, seeing this,  
Watched till I passed and from his car brought down  
Full on my head the double-pointed goad.

Only then Oedipus struck.

... one stroke  
Of my good staff sufficed to fling him clean  
Out of the chariot seat and laid him prone.

The incident shows that the attack on Laius and his escorts was motivated. They were rude, Oedipus was in a bad mood, and hot-tempered besides, and he acted according to his character. Apollo is certainly secondary here. Again, you may say that Oedipus is still carrying out the desire of the Fates—when he is only proving the premise.

Once in Thebes, Oedipus answers the riddle of the Sphinx, at which thousands had failed. The Sphinx would ask those who entered or left the city: what was it which in the morning walks on four legs, at midday on two, in the evening on three? Oedipus answered: man, proving himself the wisest among them. The Sphinx departed in shame, and the Thebans, in joy at the end of their bondage, elected him their king.

So we know that Oedipus was brave, impulsive, wise—and by way of further proof, Sophocles tells us that the Thebans
prospered under his rule. Anything that happened to Oedipus happened because of his character.

If you forget the "Argument" which states the ancient beliefs concerning the part played by the gods, and read the play as it stands, you will see the validity of our assertion. Character makes the plot.

The moment Molière established Orgon as Tartuffe's dupe, the plot automatically unfolded itself. Orgon represents a religious fanatic. It stands to reason that a converted bigot disapproves of everything he believed before.

Molière needed a man who was intolerant of everything worldly. Through conversion, Orgon became this man. This state of affairs suggests that such a man should have a family who indulged in all the innocent joys of life. Our man, Orgon, must necessarily regard all these earthly activities as sinful. Such a man will go the limit to change the ways of those under his influence or domination. He will try to reform them. They will resent it.

This determination forced the conflict, and, as the author had a clear-cut premise, the story grew out of this character.

When the author has a clear-cut premise, it is child's play to find the character who will carry the burden of that premise. When we accept the premise "Great love defies even death," we necessarily will think of a couple who defy tradition, parental objections, and death itself. What kind of person has the capacity to do all this? Certainly not Hamlet or a professor of mathematics. He must be young, proud, impetuous. He is Romeo. Romeo fits the part assigned to him as easily as Orgon does in Tartuffe. Their characters create the conflict. A plot without character is a makeshift contraption, dangling between heaven and earth like Mohammed's coffin.

What would the reader think of us if we were to announce that, after long and arduous study, we had come to the conclusion that honey is beneficial to mankind, but that the
bee’s importance is secondary, and that the bee is therefore subsidiary to its product? What would you think if we should say that the fragrance is more important than the flower, the song more important than the bird?

We should like to alter the quotation from Emerson with which we opened this chapter. For our purposes it should read:

What is a character? A factor whose virtues have not yet been discovered.

7. Characters Plotting Their Own Play

“Shallow men believe in luck,” said Emerson. There is no luck involved in the success of Ibsen’s plays. He studied, he planned, he worked hard. Let us try to look into his workroom and see him at work. Let us try to analyze Nora and Helmer of A Doll’s House as they start to plot their own story, according to the premise and character principle.

There is no doubt that Ibsen was struck by the inequality of women in his time. (The play was written in 1879.) Being a crusader of a sort, he wanted to prove that “Inequality of the sexes in marriage breeds unhappiness.”

To begin with, Ibsen knew he needed two characters to prove his premise: a husband and a wife. But not any couple would do. He had to have a husband who would epitomize the selfishness of all the men of the time, and a wife who would symbolize the subjugation of all the women. He was looking for a self-centered man and a sacrificing woman.

He chose Helmer and Nora, but as yet they were only names bearing the tags “selfish” and “unselves.” The next natural step was to round them out. The author had to be very careful in constructing his characters, because later, in conflict, they would have to make their own decisions as to what to do or what not to do. And since Ibsen had a clear-
cut premise which he was eager to prove, his characters had
to be people who could stand alone without the author's help.

Helmer became manager at a bank. He must have been a
very industrious, conscientious man to earn the highest rank
in an important institution. He oozes responsibility, suggest-
ing a merciless superior who is a stickler for order. No doubt
he demands punctuality and devotion from his subordinates.
He has an overdose of civic pride; he knows the importance
of his station and guards it with the utmost care. Respecta-
bility is his highest aim, and he is ready to sacrifice anything,
even love, to gain it. In short, Helmer is a man who is hated
by his subordinates and admired by his superiors. He is
human only at home, and then with a vengeance. His love
for his family is boundless, as is often the case with a man
who is hated and feared by others, and he thus needs more
love than the average man.

He is about thirty-eight years old, a man of average height
with a determined nature. His speech, even at home, is unctu-
ous, grave, constantly admonishing. He suggests a middle-
class background, honest and not too well off. The constant
thought he gives to his beloved bank seems to indicate that
his ambition, as a youngster, was to hold just such a post in
just such an organization. He is extremely satisfied with him-
self and has no doubts for the future.

He has no harmful habits, and does not smoke or drink
except for a glass or two on special occasions. We see him,
then, a self-centered man with high moral principles which
he demands that others observe.

All these things can be seen in the play, and while they
make only a sketchy character study, they indicate that Ibs-
sen must have known a great deal about Helmer. He also
must have known that the woman would have to oppose all
the ideals the man represented.

So he sketched Nora. She is a child: spendthrift, irrespon-
sible, lying, cheating as a child might. She is a skylark, danc-
ing, singing, careless—but loving her husband and children sincerely. It is the crux of her character that she loves her husband enough to do things for him which she would not dream of doing for anyone else.

Nora has a fine, searching mind, but she knows little of the society in which she lives. Because of her love and admiration for Helmer she is willing to be a doll wife, and as a result her mental growth is retarded despite her intelligence. She was a pampered daughter, given over to her husband for further pampering.

She is twenty-eight or thirty years old, charming, attractive. Her background is not as spotless as Helmer’s, for her father, too, was happy-go-lucky. He had peculiar ideas, and there was a hint of scandal in the family closet. Nora’s one selfishness, perhaps, is her desire to see everyone as happy as she.

Here stand the two characters which will generate conflict. But how? There is not a single hint that a triangle situation can ever develop between them. What possible conflict can arise between a couple who love each other so? If we are in any doubt, we must go back to the character studies and to the premise. There we shall find a clue. We look, and find one. Since Nora represents unselfishness, love, she will do something for her family, preferably for her husband, which will be misunderstood by him. But what kind of act will it be? If we are stuck again, we can again read the character studies which must point the answer. Helmer represents respectability. Well and good. Nora’s act should undermine or threaten the position he holds. But since she is unselfish, the deed must be done for his sake, and his reaction must show the hollowness of his love when it is matched against his respectability.

What type of act would throw this man off balance to such an extent that he forgets everything when his position is threatened? Only an act which he knows from his own ex-
perience to be most contemptible and most disgraceful: something concerning money.

Theft? That might be it, but Nora is not a thief, nor does she have access to much money. But what she does must have something to do with securing money. She must need the money badly, and it must be an amount which is larger than she could put her hands on, but small enough for her to obtain without raising a great to-do.

Before we go further we must know her motive for obtaining money in some way annoying—to put it mildly!—to her husband. Perhaps he is in debt—No, no. Helmer would never contract debts which could not be taken care of. Perhaps she needs some household accessory? No, that would not be to Helmer's vital interest. Sickness? Excellent idea. Helmer himself is ill, and Nora needs money to take care of him.

Nora's reasoning is easy to follow. She knows little of money matters. She needs money for Helmer, but Helmer would rather die than borrow. She cannot go to friends, lest Helmer discover what she has done and be humiliated. She cannot steal, as we have seen. The only course open is to go to a professional money-lender. She is aware, however, that as a woman, her signature will not be enough. She cannot ask a friend to countersign without encountering the unpleasant questions she is trying to avoid. A stranger? She could hardly approach a man she does not know without leaving the way open for an immoral proposition. She loves her husband too much even to think of such a thing. Only one person would do it for her—her father. But he is a very sick man, on the verge of dying. Healthy, he would help her get money, but there would be no play then. The characters must prove the premise through conflict; therefore Nora's father is, of necessity, dead.

Nora bemoans this fact, and that gives her an idea. She
will forge her father's signature. She's elated, once she has found this only way out. The idea is so perfect that she bubbles with joy. She not only has a way of getting the money, but of concealing from Helmer the manner in which it will be obtained. She will tell him that her father left it to her, and he will not be able to refuse it. It will be his.

She goes through with it, receives the money, and is supremely happy.

There is one hitch in the scheme. The money-lender knows the family—he works in the same bank as Helmer. He has known all along that the signature was forged, but the forgery is worth more to him than the best guarantee or deposition. If Nora cannot pay it (live up to it) Helmer will do so a thousandfold. That's why he is Helmer. With his respectability at stake, his position to be considered, he would do anything. The money-lender is safe.

If you read over the character sketches of Nora and Helmer, you will see that their characters made the story possible.

**QUESTION:** Who forced Nora to do what she did? Why couldn't she have overcome the various considerations and borrowed money legally?

**ANSWER:** The premise forced her to choose only one direction—the one which will prove it. You will say—and we shall agree—that a person has the privilege of choosing a hundred different ways to achieve his purpose. But not when you have a clear premise which you wish to prove. After close scrutiny and elimination you must find the one way which will lead you to your goal—prove your premise. Ibsen chose that one way, by drawing characters who would naturally behave in a way to prove his premise.

**QUESTION:** I don't see why there should be only one way to build a conflict. I don't believe that there was nothing for Nora to do but forge her father's name.
ANSWER: What would you have her do instead?
QUESTION: I don't know, but there must be some other way.
ANSWER: If you refuse to think, the argument is over.
QUESTION: Well, why wouldn't stealing be as plausible as forging?
ANSWER: We have already pointed out that she had no access to money, but let us pretend that she did. From whom would she steal? Not Helmer, certainly, since he has no money. Relatives? All right—but would they expose her when they learned of the theft? They could not do so without disgracing the family name, and the chances are all in favor of their saying nothing. Would she steal from neighbors, strangers? That's foreign to her character. But suppose she does—it serves only to complicate matters.
QUESTION: Isn't that what you want—conflict?
ANSWER: Only when it proves the premise.
QUESTION: Doesn't stealing do that?
ANSWER: No. When she forged her father's name, she put only her husband and herself in jeopardy; by stealing she hurts innocent people, not otherwise involved in the story. Besides, by stealing she changes the premise. The fear of discovery and inevitable disgrace would overshadow the original premise. It would be a denunciation of theft, not a plea for woman's equality.
But, you ask, what if Nora stole and was not caught? That would prove her a good thief—but not a woman meriting equality. And if she were caught? A heroic struggle would ensue in which Helmer would fight to get her out of prison—and then discard her. This is what his respectability would force him to do, thereby proving the exact opposite of the premise with which you began. No, my friend. You have a premise on the one side and a perfect character study on the other. You must stay on the straight road marked by these limits and not wander off on a byway.
QUESTION: It seems you can't get away from that premise.
ANSWER: It seems so. The premise is a tyrant who permits you to go only one way—the way of absolute proof.
QUESTION: Why couldn't Nora prostitute herself?
ANSWER: Would that prove that she was carrying the burden and responsibility of the household? That she's equal with man? That there should be no doll's house? Would it?
QUESTION: How should I know?
ANSWER: If you don't know, the argument is over.

8. Pivotal Character

The pivotal character is the protagonist. According to Webster's dictionary, the protagonist is—"one who takes the lead in any movement or cause."

Anyone who opposes the protagonist is an opponent or antagonist.

Without a pivotal character there is no play. The pivotal character is the one who creates conflict and makes the play move forward. The pivotal character knows what he wants. Without him the story flounders... in fact, there is no story.

In Othello, Iago (the pivotal character) is a man of action. Slighted by Othello, he revenges himself by sowing dissension and jealousy. He started the conflict.

In A Doll's House, Krogstad's insistence on rehabilitating his family almost drove Nora to suicide. He is the pivotal character.

In Tartuffe, Orgon's insistence to force Tartuffe on his family started the conflict.

A pivotal character must not merely desire something. He must want it so badly that he will destroy or be destroyed in the effort to attain his goal.
You might say: “Suppose Othello had given Iago the office he so passionately coveted?”

In that case there would not have been a play.

There must always be something a person wants more than anything else in life if he is to be a good pivotal character; revenge, honor, ambition, etc.

A good pivotal character must have something very vital at stake.

Not everyone can be a pivotal character.

A man whose fear is greater than his desire, or a man who has no great, all-consuming passion, or one who has patience and does not oppose, cannot be a pivotal character.

By the way, there are two types of patience; positive and negative.

Hamlet had no patience to endure (negative), but he did have patience to persevere (positive). Jeeter Lester, in Tobacco Road, had the kind of patience that made you marvel at human endurance. The patience of a martyr, despite torture, is a powerful force that we can use in a play or in any other type of writing.

There is a positive kind of patience which is relentless, death defying. Then there is a negative patience which has no resilience, no inner strength to endure hardship.

A pivotal character is necessarily aggressive, uncompromising, even ruthless.

Even though Jeeter Lester appears to be a “negative” character, he is nevertheless as provocative as the “aggressive” Iago. Both of them are pivotal characters.

We might as well clarify just what we mean when we say “negative” and “positive” (aggressive) pivotal characters.

Everybody understands what an aggressive character is, but we must explain the “negative” one. To withstand hunger, torture, physical and mental suffering for an ideal, whether real or fancied, is strength in Homeric proportions. This negative strength is really aggressive in the sense that it provokes
counter-action. Hamlet's snooping, Jeeter Lester's maddening insistence to stay on his land and actually die from sheer hunger, are actions which certainly provoke counter-action. So a negative force, if it is enduring, becomes a positive force.

Either one of these forces is good for any type of writing.

Once more, a pivotal character is necessarily aggressive, uncompromising, even ruthless, whether he is the "negative" or "positive" type.

A pivotal character is a driving force, not because he decided to be one. He becomes what he is for the simple reason that some inner or outer necessity forces him to act; there is something at stake for him, honor, health, money, protection, vengeance, or a mighty passion.

Oedipus, in Oedipus Rex, insists upon finding the King's murderer. He is the pivotal character and his aggressiveness is motivated by Apollo's threat to punish his Kingdom with pestilence if he doesn't find the murderer. It is the happiness of his people which forces him to become a pivotal character.

The six soldiers in Bury the Dead, refuse to be buried, not because of themselves, but because of the great injustice befallen on the majority of the working people. They refuse to be buried for the sake of mankind.

Krogstad in A Doll's House, is relentless for the sake of his children whom he wants to rehabilitate.

Hamlet ferrets out his father's murderers not to justify himself, but to bring the guilty to justice.

As we see, a pivotal character never becomes a pivotal character because he wants to. He is really forced by circumstances within him and outside of him to become what he is.

The growth of a pivotal character cannot be as extensive as that of the other characters. For instance, the other characters might go from hate to love or from love to hate, but not the pivotal character, because when your play starts the pivotal character is already suspicious or planning to kill. From suspicion to the discovery of unfaithfulness is a much shorter
road than from absolute faith to the discovery of unfaithfulness. Therefore, if it would take the average character ten steps to go from love to hate, the pivotal character would only travel the last four, three, two or even just one step.

Hamlet starts with a certainty (his father's ghost tells him about the murder), and he ends with murder. Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, starts with hatred, plots for revenge, and ends in desolation.

Macbeth starts with coveting the King's throne, and ends in murder and death.

The transition between blind obedience and open revolt is much greater than that between an oppressor's anger and his vengeance against a rebellious peon. Yet there is transition in both cases.

Romeo and Juliet experience hate, love, hope, despair, and death, while their parents, the pivotal characters, experience only hate and regret.

When we say that poverty encourages crime, we are not attacking an abstraction but the social forces which make poverty possible. These forces are ruthless, and their ruthlessness is represented by a man. In a play we attack the man and through him, the social forces which make him what he is. This representative cannot relent: the forces behind him back him up. And if he does weaken, you know he was a poor choice of character and another representative was needed who could faithfully serve the forces behind him.

The pivotal character can match the emotional intensity of his adversaries, but he has a smaller compass of development.

**QUESTION:** A few things still puzzle me about growth. In the movie *Juarez*, for instance, every character goes through a transition: Maximilian from vacillation to determination; Carlotta from love to madness; Diaz from faith in his cause to vacillation. Only Juarez did not grow; yet his
stolidity, his unwavering faith, make him a monumental figure. What was wrong? Why didn’t he grow?

**Answer:** He does grow, constantly, but not as obviously as the others. He is the pivotal character, whose strength, determination and leadership are responsible for the conflict. We shall come back to this and see why his central position makes his growth less apparent. But first let us show you that he does grow. He warns Maximilian—and then carries out his threat. Growth. When he finds that his forces cannot stand against the French, *he changes tactics*, disbands his army. Growth. We see him in transition. We know why he changes his mind when we hear the shepherd boy describe how his dogs unite to fight a wolf. We see how Juarez handles treachery and faces his enemies in their own camp. The scene in which he walks through a firing squad shows him in actual conflict and confirms our belief that he is a very brave man.

His depth of love for his people is proved by his relentlessness toward Maximilian. Through the constant exposition of his character we learn that his motivation is honest and unselfish.

An imperceptible transition is revealed on the surface when he murmurs, “Forgive me,” over Maximilian’s coffin. His love is revealed conclusively and we know that his cruelty was not directed against Maximilian, but against Imperialism.

**Question:** Then his growth is from *resistance* to *stronger resistance*, instead of from *hate* to *forgiveness*. I see. Why wasn’t it necessary for Juarez’ change to be as great as Maximilian’s?

**Answer:** Juarez is the pivotal character. Remember, the growth of the pivotal character is much less than that of the other characters for the simple reason that he has reached a decision before the story starts. He is the one who *forces the others to grow*. Juarez’ strength is the strength of the
masses who are willing to fight and die for their liberty.
He is not alone. He is not fighting because he wants to
fight. Necessity forces a liberty loving person to try to de-
stroy his oppressor or die, rather than submit to slavery.
If a pivotal character has no inner or outer necessity to
fight, except his own caprice as a motive, there is the danger
that any minute he might stop being a driving force, thus
betraying the premise, and with it, the play.

**QUESTION:** What about the people who want to write, act, sing,
paint? Would you call this inner urge for self-expression a
caprice?

**ANSWER:** With ninety-nine per cent of them it might be a ca-
price.

**QUESTION:** Why ninety-nine per cent?

**ANSWER:** Because ninety-nine per cent usually give up before
they have a chance to achieve anything. They have no per-
severence, no stamina, no physical or mental strength. Al-
though there are people who have both physical and mental
strength, the inner urge to create is not strong enough.

**QUESTION:** Is it possible for an element like cold, heat, fire,
water, to be a pivotal character?

**ANSWER:** No. These elements were the absolute rulers on
earth when man ambled along from the darkness of his
primitive existence. It was the eternal status quo, a state of
affairs which had existed unquestioned, unchallenged, for
billions of years. The protozoa, pleuroccocus, bacteria,
amoeba, did nothing to counteract the existing order. Man
did. Man started the conflict. Man became the pivotal char-
acter in the drama of existence. He has not only harnessed
the elements but is on the verge of conquering disease with
the new drugs which are constantly being discovered.

Man's aggressiveness against the elements is not depend-
ent upon a whim. It arises out of dire necessity and is im-
plemented by intelligence. This necessity and intelligence
forced him to split the atom and create that frightfully
destructive force, atomic energy; but if he is to survive, this very frightfulness will force him again to use it for the elevation of mankind instead of for destruction. He'll do this not from nobility, but because dire "necessity" will force his hand again.

Once more: a pivotal character is forced to be a pivotal character out of sheer necessity, and not because he wills it.
9. The Antagonist

Anyone who opposes a pivotal character necessarily becomes the opponent or antagonist. The antagonist is the one who holds back the ruthlessly onrushing protagonist. He is the one against whom the ruthless character exerts all his strength, all his cunning, all the resources of his inventive power.

If for any good reason the antagonist cannot put up a protracted fight, you might as well look for another character who will.

The antagonist in any play is necessarily as strong and, in time, as ruthless as the pivotal character. A fight is interesting only if the fighters are evenly matched. Helmer, in Doll’s House, is the antagonist against Krogstad. The protagonist and the antagonist must be dangerous foes to each other. Both of them are ruthless. The mother in The Silver Cord finds a worthy opponent in the women her sons brought home. Iago, in Othello, is the ruthless, conniving protagonist. Othello is the antagonist. Othello’s authority and power are so great that Iago cannot show his hand openly—but he courts great danger anyway, nay, his very life is in danger. Othello, then, is a worthy antagonist. The same is the case in Hamlet.

Let me now repeat it again: the antagonist must be as strong as the protagonist. The wills of conflicting personalities must clash.

If a big brute manhandles a little fellow, we turn against him, but this does not mean that we shall wait with bated breath to see the outcome of this uneven encounter. We know it beforehand.

A novel, play, or any type of writing, really is a crisis from beginning to end growing to its necessary conclusion.
10. Orchestration

When you are ready to select characters for your play, be careful to orchestrate them right. If all the characters are the same type—for instance, if all of them are bullies—it will be like an orchestra of nothing but drums.

In King Lear, Cordelia is gentle, loving, faithful; Goneril and Regan, the older daughters, are cold, heartless, and deceitful plotters. The King himself is rash, headstrong, and given to unreasoning anger.

Good orchestration is one of the reasons for rising conflict in any play.

It is possible to choose two liars, two prostitutes, two thieves for one play, but necessarily they will be different in temper, philosophy, and speech. One thief might be considerate, the other ruthless; one could be a coward, the other fearless; one might respect womanhood, the other might despise women. If both have the same temperament, the same outlook on life, there will be no conflict—and no play.

When Ibsen selected Nora and Helmer for A Doll's House, it was inevitable that he should choose a married couple, since the premise dealt with married life. This phase of selection is obvious to everyone.

The difficulty starts when the dramatist chooses people of the same type and tries to generate conflict between them.
We are thinking of Maltz' *Black Pit*, in which Joe and Iola are very much alike. They are both loving and considerate. They have the same ideals and desires and fears. No wonder, then, that Joe makes his fatal decision almost without conflict.

Nora and Helmer love each other, too. But Helmer is domineering where Nora is obedient, scrupulously accurate and truthful where Nora lies and cheats as a child would. Helmer is responsible for everything he does; Nora is careless. *Nora is everything Helmer is not; they are perfectly orchestrated.*

Suppose that Helmer had been married to Mrs. Linde. She is mentally mature, aware of Helmer's world and standards. She and Helmer might have quarreled, but they would never have created the great conflict which comes of the contrast between Nora and Helmer. A woman like Mrs. Linde would scarcely have committed the forgery, but if she had done so, she would have been aware of the seriousness of her deed.

Just as Mrs. Linde is different from Nora, Krogstad is different from Helmer. And Dr. Rank is different from all of them. Together, these contrasting characters are instruments which work together to give a well-orchestrated composition.

*Orchestration demands well-defined and uncompromising characters in opposition, moving from one pole toward another through conflict.* When we say "uncompromising," we think of Hamlet, who goes after his objective—to ferret out his father's murderer—as a bloodhound follows his quarry. We think of Helmer, whose rigid principle of civic pride causes the drama. We think of Orgon, in *Tartuffe*, who in his religious fanaticism deeds his fortune to a villain and willingly exposes his young wife to his advances.

Whenever you see a play, try to find out how the forces are lined up. The forces may be groups, as well as individuals; Fascism vs. democracy, freedom vs. slavery, religion vs. atheism. Not all religious persons who fight atheism are the same. The divergencies between their characters can be as wide as between heaven and purgatory.
In *Dinner at Eight*, Kitty and Packard are well orchestrated. Although Kitty resembles Packard in many ways, a world separates them. They both wish to be accepted in high society, but Packard wishes to reach the top in politics. Kitty abhors politics and Washington. She has nothing to do; he has no moment for relaxation. She lies in bed awaiting her lover; he rushes from place to place to do business. Between such characters there are endless possibilities for conflict.

In every big movement there are smaller movements. Let us suppose that the big movement in a play is from *love* to *hate*. What are the smaller movements within it? *Tolerance to intolerance* is one, and it can be broken down into *indifference* to *annoyance*. Now, whichever movement you choose for your play will affect the orchestration of your characters. Characters orchestrated for the *love-to-hate* movement would be far too violent for the smaller movement from *indifference* to *annoyance*. Chekhov’s characters fit the movements he chose for his plays.

Kitty and Packard, for instance, would never do for *The Cherry Orchard*, and *The Cherry Orchard* characters would never get to first base in *King Lear*. Your characters should be as contrasted as the movement you are using will permit. Fine plays can be written on the smaller movements, but even on this smaller scale the conflict must be sharp, as the plays of Chekhov indicate.

When someone says, “It is a rainy day,” we really don’t know what kind of rain he refers to. It can be:

- drizzle (fine drops)
- rain (steady fall)
- downpour (heavy rain)
- storm (rain plus disturbed atmosphere).

Similarly, someone might remark, “So-and-so is a bad person.” We haven’t the slightest idea what that “bad” means. Is he:
unreliable
untrustworthy
a liar
a thief
a racketeer
a rapist
a killer?

We have to know exactly in what category every character belongs. As the author, you have to know every character's exact status, because you will orchestrate him with his opposites. Different orchestration is necessary for different movements. But there must be orchestration—well-defined, strong, uncompromising characters in conflict commensurate to the movement of the play.

If, for instance, the movement was
from
indifference
to
boredom
to
impatience
to
irritation
to
annoyance
to
anger

your characters could not be black and white. They would be light gray against dark gray, perhaps—but they would be orchestrated.

If your characters are correctly orchestrated, as are those in A Doll's House or Tartuffe or Hamlet, their speech will necessarily be contrasted also. For instance, if one of your characters is virginal and the other a rake, their dialogue will
reflect their respective natures. The first has no experience, and her ideas will be naïve. Casanova, in contrast, has had a wealth of experience, which will be reflected in everything he says. Any meeting between the two is sure to reveal the knowledge of one, the ignorance of the other. If you are faithful to your tridimensional character outlines, your characters will be faithful to themselves in speech and manner, and you need have no fear about contrast. If you bring a professor of English face to face with a man who never utters a sentence without mangling it, you'll have all the contrast you need without going out of your way to find it. If these two characters happen to be in conflict, trying to prove the premise of a play, the conflict will be more colorful and exciting because of the contrast in speech. *Contrast must be inherent in character.*

Conflict is sustained through growth. The naïve virgin may become wiser. She may teach a lesson, in marriage, to Casanova, who becomes unsure of himself. The professor may become careless with his speech, while the other man turns into an eloquent speaker. Remember what growth did to Eliza in Shaw's *Pygmalion*. A thief may become honest—and an honest man may turn thief. The philanderer learns to be faithful, the faithful wife turns to philandering. The unorganized worker becomes strong through organization. These are bold outlines, of course. There are infinite variations of growth possible for any character—but growth there must be. Without growth you'll lose whatever contrast you had at the beginning of the play. The absence of growth signals the lack of conflict; and the lack of conflict indicates that your characters were not well orchestrated.


tt. Unity of Opposites

Even assuming a play is well orchestrated, what assurance have we that the antagonists won't make a truce in the middle
and call it quits? The answer to this question is to be found in the "unity of opposites." It is a phrase that many people apply wrongly or misunderstand in the first place. Unity of opposites does not refer to any opposing forces or wills in a clash. Misapplication of this unity leads to a condition in which the characters cannot carry a conflict through to the finish. Our first insurance against this catastrophe is to define our terms—what is the unity of opposites?

If a man in a crowd is pushed by a stranger, and, after some insulting remarks on both sides, hits him, will the resulting fight be the result of a unity of opposites?

Only superficially, not fundamentally. The men have a desire to fight. Their egos have been slighted, they want physical revenge, but the difference between them is not so deep-rooted that only an injury or death would straighten it out. These are antagonists who might quit in the middle of a play. They might rationalize, explain, apologize, and shake hands. The real unity of opposites is one in which compromise is impossible.

We must go to nature again for an example before we apply the rule to human beings. Can anyone imagine a compromise between a deadly disease germ and the white corpuscles in a human body? It will be a fight to the finish, because the opposites are so constituted that they must destroy each other to live. There is no choice. A germ cannot say: "Oh, well, this white corpuscle is too tough for me; I'll find another place to live." Nor can the corpuscle let the germ alone, without sacrificing itself. They are opposites, united to destroy each other.

Now let's apply this same principle to the theater. Nora and Helmer were united by many things: love, home, children, law, society, desire. Yet they were opposites. It was necessary for their individual characters that this unity should be broken, or that one of them should succumb completely to the other—thus killing his individuality.
Like the germ and the corpuscle, the unity could be broken and the play ended only by the "death" of some dominant quality in one of the characters—Nora's docility, in the play. Naturally, death in the theater need not apply to the death of a human being. The severing of the unity between Nora and Helmer was a very painful thing, not at all easy. The closer the unity, the more difficult the breaking. And this unity, despite the qualitative change that has taken place in it, still affects the characters it has bound. In *Idiot's Delight*, the characters had nothing to bind them to each other. If one person was disagreeable he could leave.

In *Journey's End*, on the other hand, the ironclad unity of the soldiers was established beyond doubt. We were convinced that they had to stay in the trenches, perhaps die there, although they wished to be thousands of miles away. Some drank to keep up the courage that would enable them to do what was expected of them. Let us analyze their situation. These men lived in a society in which certain contradictions culminated in war. The men did not wish to fight, having no interests to safeguard, but they were sent to kill because they were subject to the desires of those who decided to solve their economic problem with war. Moreover, these young men had been taught since childhood that to die for one's country is heroic. They are torn between conflicting emotions: to escape and live will mean being stamped as a coward and despised; to stay will mean distinction—and death. Between these desires lies drama. The play is a good example of the unity of opposites.

In nature nothing is ever "destroyed" or "dead." It is transformed into another shape, substance, or element. Nora's love for Helmer was transformed into liberation and thirst for more knowledge. His smugness was transformed into a search for the truth about himself and his relation to society. A lost equilibrium tries to find a new equilibrium for itself.

Take the case of Jack the Ripper. This man, who killed so
indiscriminately, was never caught by the police, because his motivation was obscure. He seemed to have no relationship, no unity with his victims. No rancor, no anger, no jealousy, no revenge was connected with his acts. He and his victim represented opposites without unity. The motivation was missing. This same lack of motivation explains why so many bad crime plays are written. Theft, or murder, for money so that one can show off before a woman is never a real motivation. It is superficial. We do not see the irresistible force behind the crime. Criminals are people whose backgrounds have thwarted them, making crime necessary in the absence of more normal action. If we are given the opportunity of seeing how a murderer is forced by necessity, environment, and inner and outer contradictions to commit a crime, we are witnessing the unity of opposites in action. Proper motivation establishes unity between the opposites.

A pimp asks more money from a prostitute. Shall she give it to him? She has to. She has a sick husband whom she adores. If she refuses the pimp, he might give her secret away.

You insult your friend. He is angry and leaves, never to return. But if he lent you ten thousand dollars, can he leave so easily, never to return?

Your daughter falls in love with a man whom you abhor. Can she leave your home? Of course she can. But will she, if she expected you to put her future husband into business with your backing?

You are in partnership with your father-in-law. You don’t like the old man’s way of doing business. Can you dissolve this union? We don’t see any reason why not. The only trouble is that the old man holds a check you have forged, and he can turn you into prison at his pleasure.

You are living with your stepfather. You hate him and still insist on staying in his house. Why? You have a horrible suspicion that he killed your father, and you stay to prove it.
You divided your fortune between your children, and in return you ask only one room in their spacious house. Later they become disagreeable, even insulting. Can you pack up and leave them, when you have no means left to support yourself?

(The last two examples may seem familiar. They should be, since they are Hamlet and King Lear again.)

Fascism and democracy in a death grip are a perfect unity of opposites. One has to be destroyed so that the other may live. Here are still others:

- science—superstition
- religion—atheism
- capitalism—communism

We could go on endlessly, citing unities of opposites in which the characters are so bound to each other that compromise is impossible. Of course, the characters have to be made of such stuff that they will go the limit. The unity between opposites must be so strong that the deadlock can be broken only if one of the adversaries or both are exhausted, beaten, or annihilated completely at the end.

If King Lear’s daughters had understood the King’s plight, there would have been no drama. If Helmer could have seen the motivation of Nora’s forgery, that it was done for him, A Doll’s House would never have been written. If a warring country’s government could only fathom the abysmal fear of the soldiers, they might let them go home and stop the war, but can they let them do such a thing? Of course not. King Lear’s daughters are unrelenting because it is in their nature and because they have set their hearts on a goal. Governments are at war because inner contradictions force them on the road to destruction.

Here is a synopsis for a skit which establishes the unity of opposites as the story goes along:

It is a brisk winter evening, and you are going home from work. A little dog attaches himself to you. You say, “Nice
doggie," and since there is no unity between you two, you go on, forgetting about the dog. At the door you see that he is still there. He adopted you, so to speak. But you want no part of him, and say, "Go away, doggie, go away."

You go up, eat supper with your wife, read, listen to the radio, and go to bed. Next morning, with a shock, you see that the dog is still there, waiting hopefully for you, wagging his tail.

"What persistence!" you say, and pity him. You go to the subway, the dog trailing behind. You lose him at the entrance, and a few minutes later you forget him. But in the evening, coming home, just when you are about to go into your house, you stumble over him again. Apparently he was waiting, and greets you as a long-lost friend. He is freezing and emaciated by now, but happy and hopeful that you will take him in. You will, if your heart is in the right place. You don't want a dog, but this maddening persistence from a dumb animal wears you down. He wants you, he loves you, and it seems he is willing to die at your doorstep rather than give you up.

You take him upstairs. With his stubbornness, he has established a unity of opposites between you two.

But your wife is outraged. She wants no part of the dog. You defend your act, but to no avail. She is adamant. She says, "The dog or me—choose," so you give in. After feeding your little friend, you tell your wife "You take him out—I haven't the heart." She puts him out with alacrity, but afterwards feels a little sad as she remembers the sniveling animal out in the cold.

She starts to have misgivings. She is angry that she is forced to be heartless, but after all, she never wanted a dog, and she doesn't want one now.

The evening is ruined. You look at your wife with a strange, hostile eye, as if you saw her for the first time in her true colors.

In the morning you meet the dog again, but now you are really angry. He caused the first real breach between you and
your wife. You try to chase the darned animal away, but the dog refuses to be chased. He escorts you to the subway again, but now you are sure that you will stumble into him when you come back in the evening.

All day long you think of the dog and your wife. He is frozen to death by now, you think. You decide you have to do something about it, and can hardly wait to go home.

When you arrive home, there is no dog, and instead of going home, you start to look for him. But there is no sign of the animal. You are terribly disappointed. You wanted to bring him up again into your house and defy your wife. If she wants to leave you on account of the dog, let her—she never loved you, anyway.

You go up, bitterness in your heart, and you are confronted with the strangest spectacle you ever saw. You see the little stray dog sitting on your best armchair, washed, combed; and before him kneels your wife, talking baby talk to him.

The dog is the pivotal character in this case. His determination changed two human beings. One equilibrium was lost, but another was found. Even if your wife would not have taken the dog in, the old relationship would have been broken just the same.

The real unity of opposites can be broken only if a trait or dominant quality in one or more characters is fundamentally changed. In a real unity of opposites, compromise is impossible.

After you have found your premise, you had better find out immediately—testing if necessary—whether the characters have the unity of opposites between them. If they do not have this strong, unbreakable bond between them, your conflict will never rise to a climax.
III

CONFLICT

r. Origin of Action

The blowing of the wind is action, even if it is only a breeze. And rain is action, even to its name. The verb and the noun are one.

Our ancestor, the cave man, killed that he might eat—that was certainly action.

The walking of a man is action, the flight of a bird, the burning of a house, the reading of a book. Every manifestation of life is "action."

Can we, then, treat action as an independent phenomenon? Let’s look at wind. What we call wind is the mass contraction and expansion of the invisible ocean of air which surrounds us. Cold and heat create this movement called "wind." It is the result of varied contributing factors which make action possible. Wind, inactive, alone, is impossible.

Rain is the product of the sun and other factors. Without them there would be no rain.

The cave man killed. Killing is an action, but behind it there is a man who lives under conditions which force him to kill: for food, self-defense, or glory. Killing, although an "action," is only the result of important factors.

There is no action under the sun which is the origin and the result in one. Everything results from something else; action cannot come of itself.

Let us look further for the origin of action.
Motion, we know, is equivalent to action. Where does motion come from? We are told that motion is matter, and matter energy, but since energy is generally recognized as motion, we're back where we started.

Let us take a concrete example: the protozoon. This one-celled creature is active. It eats and digests by absorption; it moves. It performs the necessary life activities, and they are, obviously, the outgrowth of something specific: the protozoon.

Is the action of the protozoon inherent or acquired? We find that the chemical composition of the animal includes oxygen, hydrogen, phosphorus, iron, calcium. These are all complex elements—each highly active in its composition. It seems, then, that the protozoon inherited "action," with its other characteristics, from its multiple parents.

We had best halt our search right here, before it entangles us in the solar system. We cannot find action in a pure, isolated form, although it is always present as the result of other conditions. It is safe to say, we conclude, that action is not more important than the contributing factors which give rise to it.

2. Cause and Effect

In this chapter we shall divide conflict into four major divisions: the first will be "static," the second "jumping," the third "slowly rising," and the fourth "foreshadowing." We shall examine these different conflicts to see why one is static, and remains static regardless of what you do, why the second jumps, defying reality and common sense, why the third, the slowly rising, grows naturally without obvious effort from the playwright, and why without foreshadowing conflict no play can exist.

But first let us trace a conflict and see how it comes into being.
Assume that you are a gentle, inoffensive young man. You have never hurt anyone, nor have you any intention of breaking laws in the future. You are single, and you meet a girl who pleases you at a party to which you had not meant to go. You like her smile, the tone of her voice, her dress. Her tastes and yours coincide. In short, this seems to be the beginning of a deep-rooted love.

With great trepidation you invite her to see a show with you. She accepts. There is nothing wrong in this, nothing unusual, and yet it may be a turning point in your life.

At home you look over your wardrobe, which consists of the single suit you wear on all gala occasions. Under your critical eyes it sheds all the requirements you think necessary for such a suit. For one thing, you decide it is out of style; for another, it looks cheap and shabby. She is not blind; she is sure to notice.

You decide that you must have a new suit. But how? There is no money. What you earn you hand over to your mother, who keeps house for you and your two small sisters. Your father is dead, and your salary must take care of all the family expenses, the shoes for the children, the doctor bills for your mother. The rent is due. . . . No, you cannot buy a suit.

For the first time, you feel old. You remember that you are over twenty-five, that it will be years before either of your sisters is old enough to work. What’s the use of planning—of living—of taking your girl to the theater. Nothing can come of it, anyway. So, you drop her.

This step makes you cross at home, listless at business. You may brood over your condition; you will be despondent. You cannot stop thinking of the girl, of what she must think of you, of whether you dare call her up, of the impossibility of your ever seeing her again. You are negligent at the office, and before you realize it, you are out of a job. This does not improve your temper. You go on a frantic job hunt and find nothing. You apply for relief—and get it, after a harrowing, long-
drawn-out, shameful experience. You feel as useless as a squeezed lemon. After you get on relief you discover that you receive too little to sustain life well, but just enough to keep you from dying of hunger.

As you see, this conflict, and almost all conflict, can be traced to the environment, the social conditions of the individual.

Now the question is of what material you are made. How determined are you? How much stamina have you? What amount of suffering can you endure? What was your hope for the future? How farseeing are you? Have you imagination? Have you the ability to plan a long-range program for yourself? Are you physically able to carry out any program you may plan?

If you are sufficiently aroused, you will make a decision. And this decision will set in motion forces to thwart itself, foreshadowing a counteraction which will oppose you. You may never be aware of the process, but the playwright must be. You never knew, when you invited this girl to the theater, that you had started a long chain of events which would culminate in your desperate decision to take action now. If you are strong enough, conflict is born, the result of a long, evolutionary process which might have begun with an everyday occurrence—an invitation, perhaps.

If the young man makes a decision, but lacks the strength to carry it through, or if he is a coward, the play will be static, moving very slowly, and then on an even plane. The author would do best to leave such a character alone. He is not yet ripe enough to carry on a protracted conflict. If the dramatist has vision, he may be able to visualize this character at the psychological moment—the point of attack—when the weakling or coward is not only able to face a battle, but can meet his adversary more than halfway. This will be discussed further under "Point of Attack."
A jumping conflict would occur if the young man decided, upon seeing the shabbiness of his suit, to rob a bank, or hold up a passer-by. It is illogical that an inoffensive boy would arrive at such a conclusion so rapidly. There would have to be more crushing events, each more urgent and painful than the one before, to force him to take this fatal step. It is possible that at a moment of frustration and despair a man will do the unexpected in real life—but never in the theater. There we wish to see the natural sequence, the step-by-step development of a character. We want to see how the cloak of decency, high moral standards, is torn away from a character shred by shred by the forces emanating from him and from his surroundings.

Every rising conflict should be foreshadowed first by the determined forces lined up against each other. We shall make this clearer as we go along, but there is one thing we wish to emphasize here: all the conflicts within the big, major conflict will be crystallized in the premise of the play. The small conflicts, which we call “transition,” lead the character from one state of mind to another, until he is compelled to make a decision. (See “Transition.”) Through these transitions, or small conflicts, the character will grow in a slow, even tempo.

In another chapter we have discussed the complexity of the word “happiness.” Take away a small fraction of any part, and you see how the whole structure of “happiness” loses its unity and undergoes a radical change, which, in the process of reshifting, may turn “happiness” into “unhappiness.” This law governs infinitesimal cells, humans, and the solar system.

Dr. Milislaw Demerec read a paper on Heredity before the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in Richmond, Virginia, on December 30, 1938. He wrote:

The balance within a gene system is so sensitive that the absence of even one gene out of a total of several thousand may upset it to
such an extent that this system is not able to function and the organism does not survive. Moreover, numerous cases of interaction between genes are on record where a change in one gene affects the functioning of another seemingly unrelated gene. Considering all the evidence, it seems apparent that the activity of a gene is determined by three internal factors: (1) the chemical constitution of the gene itself, (2) the genetic constitution of the gene system in which it acts, and (3) by the position of the gene in the gene system. These three internal factors, together with the external factors forming the environment, determine the phenotype (totality of inheritable characteristics) of the organism.

A gene, therefore, should be considered as a unit part of a well-organized system and a chromosome a higher step in that organization. In that sense genes as individual units with fixed properties do not exist, but their existence as component units of a larger system, with properties partially determined by that system, cannot be denied.

Just as a gene is a unit, but part of a well-organized society of genes, a human being is a unit, part of a well-organized society of human beings. Whatever change comes over the society will affect him; whatever happens to him will affect the society.

You can find conflict all around you. Watch the members of your family, your friends, your relatives, your acquaintances, your business associates, and see if you can discover one of the following traits: affection, abusiveness, arrogance, avarice, accuracy, awkwardness, brazenness, bragging, craftiness, confusion, cunning, conceit, contemptuousness, cleverness, clumsiness, curiosity, cowardice, cruelty, dignity, dishonesty, dissipation, envy, eagerness, egotism, extravagance, fickleness, fidelity, frugality, gaiety, garrulity, gallantry, generosity, honesty, hesitance, hysteria, heedlessness, ill-temper, idealism, impulsiveness, indolence, impotence, impudence, kindness, loyalty, lucidity, morbidity, maliciousness, mysticism, modesty, obstinacy, prudishness, placidity, patience,
pretentiousness, passion, restlessness, submission, sarcasm, simplicity, skepticism, savagery, solemnity, suspicion, stoicism, secretiveness, sensitivity, snobbery, treachery, tenderness, untidiness, versatility, vindictiveness, vulgarity, zealousness.

Any of these, and thousands of other traits, can be the soil from which a conflict springs. Let a skeptic oppose a militant believer and you have a conflict.

Cold and heat create conflict: thunder and lightning. Bring opposites face to face and conflict is inevitable. Let each of these adjectives represent a man, and imagine the possible conflicts when they meet:

frugal—spendthrift
moral—immoral
dirty—immaculate
optimistic—pessimistic
gentle—ruthless
faithful—fickle
clever—stupid
calm—violent
cheerful—morbid
healthy—hypochondriac
humorous—humorless
sensitive—insensitive
dainty—vulgar
naïve—worldly
brave—cowardly.

When our cave-man ancestor went after food, he fought with a tangible enemy: a huge beast which meant food—a conflict. He threw his life into the balance, and the fight was to the death. This was rising conflict: conflict, crisis, conclusion.

A football game represents conflict. The teams are evenly
matched—two strong groups face each other. (See "Orchestration.") But since victory is the goal, the fight will be bitter and hard won.

Boxing is conflict. All competitive sports are conflict. A saloon brawl is conflict. A fight for supremacy among men or nations is conflict. Every manifestation of life, from birth to death, is conflict.

There are more complex forms of conflict, but they all rise on this simple basis: attack and counterattack. *We see real, rising conflict when the antagonists are evenly matched.* There is no thrill in watching a strong, skillful man fighting a sickly, awkward one. When two people are evenly matched, whether in the prize ring or on the stage, each is forced to utilize all that is in him. Each will reveal how much he knows about generalship; how his mind works in an emergency; what kind of defense he is capable of; how strong he really is; whether he has any reserve to marshal as a defense when he's in danger. Attack, counterattack; conflict.

If we try to isolate and examine conflict as an independent phenomenon, we are in danger of being led up a blind alley. There is nothing in existence which is out of touch with its surroundings or the social order in which it exists. Nothing lives for its own sake; everything is supplementary to every other thing.

The germ of conflict can be traced in anything, anywhere. Not everyone knows the answer when he is asked to name his ambition in life. Yet he has one, no matter how humble, perhaps for that very day, week, or month. And out of that small, seemingly inconsequential ambition, a rising conflict may grow. The conflict may become increasingly serious, reach a crisis, then come to a climax, and the individual is forced to make a decision which will alter his life considerably.

Nature has an elaborate system of distributing the seeds of
various plants. If every single seed were given a chance to develop in its year, mankind would be choked out of existence—and the plants as well.

Every human being has an ambition of some sort, depending on the character of the individual. If a hundred people have similar ambitions, the odds are that only one of them will have the perfect combination of circumstances, in himself and in the world about him, which will permit him to achieve his goal. We are thus brought back to character, to the reason why one will persist and another will not.

There is no doubt that conflict grows out of character. The intensity of the conflict will be determined by the strength of will of the three-dimensional individual who is the protagonist.

A seed may fall at any given point—but it will not necessarily germinate. And ambition may be found anywhere, but whether or not it germinates will depend upon the physical, sociological, and psychological condition of the person in whom it exists.

If ambition were to flourish with the same intensity in every man, that too would spell mankind’s doom.

On the surface, a healthy conflict consists of two forces in opposition. At bottom, each of these forces is the product of many complicated circumstances in a chronological sequence, creating tension so terrific that it must culminate in an explosion.

Let us witness another example of how conflict comes into being.

*Brass Ankle*, a play of the 1930’s, offers a good example of how conflict is born.

**Larry [the husband, startled]:** Ruth and I aren’t goin’ to keep that kid, Doctor. You surely don’t think we’re goin’ to keep a nigger in the family.
Dr. Wainwright: That, of course, is your affair, yours and Ruth's. After all, he is your son.

Larry: My son—a nigger!

Larry is the leading citizen of a small town, and he is fighting to segregate the Negro from the white. He believes that even a drop of Negro blood makes a man unfit to associate with whites, and now his wife, white, has given birth to a Negro. It is a personal tragedy. If the town gets wind of it, he will become a laughingstock for life. This is an aggravated conflict. Larry will be forced to make a decision: admit the child is his own, or deny his fatherhood. But at this moment we are not interested in what will happen; we wish to trace the origin of the conflict. We want to know how conflicts come into being.

The author says:

Larry is about thirty years of age, tall, straight and good-looking, with fair hair and high color. His quick nervous gestures indicate a high-strung and emotional nature.

Before his marriage he was lazy, we dare say. He was pampered by women, and perhaps had many affairs. But there was one girl, Ruth, John Chaldon's granddaughter, a dark, compelling beauty, a lady, different from the other women in the village. She never paid any attention to Larry, but he wooed her persistently, mended his ways, and at last she gave in and married him.

Is there any clue thus far which would indicate a conflict to come? There are many, but they would mean nothing if the locale happened to be New York. Don't forget the vital importance of the location—we shall see why, later.

Once more, Larry's physical make-up: good-looking. He is spoiled, he has a way with women. Otherwise he would never have married Ruth, and the tragedy would not have occurred.
Now the environment, the particular time of the event. It is two generations after the Civil War. Liberated Negroes live in the town, as do mulattoes, and part Negroes who pass as whites. There are more than a few nice, respectable families, apparently white, who are known to the village doctor to be Negro. Having brought most of them into the world, he alone knows who is who. He knows that Ruth has Negro blood in her, although she has passed for white. As a matter of fact, she has thought herself white. She has an eight-year-old daughter who is apparently white. The second child is one of those rare throwbacks.

That Ruth is good-looking and a lady is also an important factor in the coming conflict.

LARRY: I always swore I'd marry a lady. I ain't got no kick comin'.

And in another place:

LARRY: . . . and I owe it all to you. I never had any ambition until I married you.

Larry is now the proprietor of a successful store, thanks to Ruth's influence.

Their physical qualities attracted them to each other. The environment made Larry what he was: lazy, arrogant, spoiled; it also made Ruth dignified, soft-spoken. To him, she was an ideal; to her, he was a child. Her dignity appealed to him, since he lacked dignity; his devil-may-care manner appealed to her, since she lacked ease. His great love assured her that she could make a man of him.

The environment again: a small town, few young people. If there had been more girls, Larry might not have married Ruth. But there weren't many girls—and he is supremely happy with his wife. He is more and more ambitious, and the townsfolk want him to be the first mayor of the growing community.
AGNES [a neighbor]: Lee [her husband] says you've got the case on the Jackson children all ready for the Superintendent of Education. I've had a lot to do with that, you know. If I hadn't kept after him he never would have stirred himself. I say, if he expects me to give him children, he's got to see that they can go to school without havin' to sit by people we all know's got nigger blood.

LARRY [in a tired voice]: Yes, Agnes, we know you had a lot to do with it.

This dialogue indicates the town's anti-Negro sentiment which forces Larry to take an anti-Negro stand, too. It also shows that he is the leader, and we know he wishes to remain the leader for the love of Ruth. So he runs and barks with the pack, aggravating, building, strengthening the coming conflict which will crush him.

So it seems that conflict does spring from character after all, and that if we wish to know the structure of conflict, we must first know character. But since character is influenced by environment, we must know that, too. It might seem that conflict springs spontaneously from one single cause, but this is not true. A complexity of many reasons makes one solitary conflict.

3. Static

Characters who cannot make a decision in a play are responsible for static conflict—or, rather, let us blame the dramatist who chooses the characters. You cannot expect a rising conflict from a man who wants nothing or does not know what he wants.

Static means not moving, not exerting force of any kind. Since we intend to go into a detailed analysis of what makes dramatic action static, we must point out right here that even the most static conflict has movement of some kind. Nothing in nature is absolutely static. An inanimate object is full of
movement which the naked eye cannot see; a dead scene in a play also contains movement, but so slow that it seems to be standing still.

No dialogue, even the cleverest, can move a play if it does not further the conflict. Only conflict can generate more conflict, and the first conflict comes from a conscious will striving to achieve a goal which was determined by the premise of the play.

A play can have only one major premise, but each character has his own premise which clashes with the others. Currents and undercurrents will cross and recross—but all of them must further the life line, the main premise of the play.

If, for instance, a woman perceives that her life is sterile, and cries her heart out, pacing her room, but does nothing about it, she is a static character. The dramatist may put the most haunting lines in her mouth, but she remains impotent and static. Grief is not enough to create conflict; we need a will which can consciously do something about the problem.

Here is a good example of static conflict:

HE: Do you love me?
SHE: Oh, I don't know.
HE: Can't you make up your mind?
SHE: I will.
HE: When?
SHE: Oh . . . soon.
HE: How soon?
SHE: Oh, I don't know.
HE: May I help?
SHE: That wouldn't be fair, would it?
HE: Everything is fair in love, especially if I can convince you that I am the one man you want.
SHE: How would you do that?
HE: First of all I would kiss you—
SHE: Oh, but I won't let you until we are engaged.
HE: If you don't let me kiss you, how on earth are you going to find out whether you love me or not?
She: If I like your company . . .
He: Do you like my company?
She: Oh, I don’t know—yet.
He: That settles the argument.
She: How?
He: You said—
She: Later on I might learn to like your company, though.
He: How long will that take?
She: How am I to know?

We can go on and on, and still there will be no substantial change in these characters. There is conflict, all right, but it is static. They remain on the same level. We can attribute this staticness to bad orchestration. Both are the same type—there is no deep conviction in either of them. Even the man who pursues the woman lacks the drive, the determination of a deep-rooted conviction that this is the only woman he wants for his mate. They can go on like this for months. They might drift apart, or the man might force a decision at the end—the Lord knows when. As they stand right now, they are no happy choice for a dramatic composition.

Without attack, counterattack, there can be no rising conflict.

She started from the pole of “uncertainty,” and at the end, she is still uncertain. He started from the pole of hope, and at the end, he is still in the same state of mind.

If a character starts from “virtuousness” and goes to “villainy,” let us see what intervening steps she has to take:
1. Virtuous (chaste, pure)
2. Thwarted (frustrated in her virtue)
3. Incorrect (faulty, unbecoming behavior)
4. Improper (she becomes indecorous, almost indecent)
5. Disorderly (unmanageable)
6. Immoral (licentious)
7. Villainous (depraved, wretched)
If a character stops at the first or second step and lingers there too long before taking the next step, the play will become static. Such staticness usually occurs when the play lacks the driving force which is the premise.

Here is an interesting static play, *Idiot's Delight*, by Robert E. Sherwood. Although the play's moral is highly commendable and the author is deservedly a well-known playwright, it is a classic example of how not to write a play. (See synopsis on page 294.)

The premise of this play is: Do armament manufacturers stir up trouble and war? The author's answer is yes.

The premise is unfortunate—it is superficial. The play has direction, but the moment the author chooses a segregated minority group as the archenemy of peace, he negates the truth. Can we say that only the sun is responsible for rain? Of course not. There can be no rain without the oceans and other factors. No armament maker can stir up trouble if there is economic stability and contentment in the world. Armament manufacturing is the outgrowth of militarism, insufficient domestic and foreign markets, unemployment, and the like. Although Mr. Sherwood speaks about the people in the postscript of the printed version of his play, he sadly neglected them in *Idiot's Delight*.

There are no people in his play, no people who really matter. We see Mr. Weber, the sinister armament manufacturer, who says he wouldn't sell armaments if there were no buyers. This is true. The crux of the point is, why do they buy armaments? Mr. Sherwood has nothing to say about it. Since the conception of his premise is superficial, his characters necessarily become colored photographs.

His two main characters are Harry and Irene. Harry moves from *callousness* to *sincerity* and *fearlessness of death*. Irene starts from *loose morals*, and ends up on the same lofty heights as Harry.
If there are eight steps between these two poles, then they started at the first, stayed on it for two and one-half acts, leaped over the intervening second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth steps as if they had never existed, and started to move again from the seventh to the eighth step during the last part of the play.

Characters wander in and out with no particular motivation. They enter, introduce themselves, and leave because the author wishes to introduce someone else. They re-enter for some artificial reason, tell what they think and how they feel, and wander out again so that the next batch may come on.

One thing on which we hope our critics will agree with us is that a play should have conflict. *Idiot's Delight* has it only in rare spots. Characters, instead of engaging in conflict, tell us about themselves, which is contrary to all standards of drama. What a pity that Harry, jovial and good-natured, and Irene, with a colorful background, were not used more advantageously. Here are a few, typical excerpts:

We are in the cocktail lounge of the Hotel Monte Gabriele. A war is expected at any moment. The borders have been closed, and the guests cannot leave. We turn to page six and read:

DON: It's lovely there, too.
CHERRY: But I hear it has become too crowded there now. I—my wife and I hoped it would be quieter here.
DON: Well, at the moment—it is rather quiet here. *[No conflict.]*

Now we turn to page thirty-two. People are still wandering in and out, aimlessly. Quillery enters, sits down. Five officers come in and talk in Italian. Harry comes in and talks to the Doctor about nothing in particular. The Doctor leaves, and Harry talks to Quillery. After a moment or so the latter, without apparent cause, addresses Harry as "Comrade." The author says, when Quillery comes in, "an extreme radical-
socialist, but still, French." What the audience sees is that he is mad, except at a very few rational moments. Why should he be mad? Because, apparently, he is a radical-socialist, and extreme radical-socialists are all mad. Later he is killed for taunting the Fascists, but now he and Harry talk of pigs, cigarettes, and war. It is all empty talk, and then he says—this socialist—"This is not 1914, remember. Since then, some new voices have been heard—loud voices. I need mention only one of them—Lenin—Nikolai Lenin." Since this extreme radical-socialist is a madman, and is treated as such by his fellow characters, the audience may believe they are hearing of another extreme radical-socialist (synonym: madman). Then Quillery talks of revolution, futile idealism to Harry, who doesn't know what it's all about. But that just shows you how crazy these extreme radical-socialists are.

Now we are on page forty-four. The cast is still coming in and going out. The Doctor bewails the bad fortune that keeps him here. They drink, they talk. A war may break out, but there is still no sign of even static conflict. There is no sign of a character, with the exception of a certain madman to whom we have referred.

We turn to page sixty-six, sure that we shall have some action this far along in the play.

**weber:** Will you have a drink, Irene?

**irene:** No, thank you.

**weber:** Will you, Captain Locicero?

**capt.**: Thank you. Brandy and soda, Dumpty.

**dumpty:** Si, Signor.

**bebe:** [yells] Edna! We're going to have a drink!

[Edna comes in.]

**weber:** For me, Cinzano.

**dumpty:** Oui, Monsieur. [He goes into the bar.]

**doctor:** It is all incredible.

**harry:** Nevertheless, Doctor, I remain an optimist. [He looks at Irene.] Let doubt prevail—throughout this night—with dawn
will come again the light of truth! [He turns to Shirley.] Come on, honey—let’s dance. [They dance.]

Curtain

We rub our eyes, but this remains the end of the first act. Should any young playwright dare to submit a play such as this to any manager, he would risk being thrown out on his ear. The audience must share Harry’s optimism if it is to overcome such a dose of hopelessness.

Sherwood must have seen or read Journey’s End, in which soldiers in the front-line trenches go to pieces in the nerve-racking wait before they go over the top. The people in Idiot’s Delight are also waiting for war, but there is a difference. In Journey’s End we have characters, flesh-and-blood people, whom we know. They are striving to keep up their courage. We feel, we know, the “Big Push” may come any minute, and they have no choice but to face it and die. In Idiot’s Delight the characters are not in immediate danger.

There is no doubt that Sherwood had the best of intentions when he wrote the play, but good intentions are not enough.

The greatest dramatic moment of Idiot’s Delight is in the second act. It is worth while to glance at it. Quillery heard from a mechanic, who may have been wrong, that the Italians have bombarded Paris. He goes berserk. He shouts.

QUILLERY: I say God damn you, assassins!
MAJOR AND SOLDIERS [jump up]: Assassins!
HARRY: Now listen, pal . . .
SHIRLEY: Harry! Don’t get yourself mixed up in this mess!
QUILLERY: You see, we stand together! France, England, America! Allies!
HARRY: Shut up, France! It’s O.K., Captain. We can handle this.
QUILLERY: They don’t dare fight against the power of England and France! The free democracies against the Fascist tyranny!
HARRY: Now, for God’s sake, stop fluctuating!
QUILLERY: England and France are fighting for the hopes of mankind!
HARRY: A minute ago, England was a butcher in a dress suit. Now we're allies!
QUILLERY: We stand together. We stand together, forever! [Turns to officers.]

The author makes this pitiful figure turn toward the Italian officers. He is afraid they will not take offense, in which case the great dramatic scene will collapse. So the poor fool turns toward the officers.

QUILLERY: I say God damn you. God damn the villains that sent you on this errand of death.
CAPTAIN: If you don't close your mouth, Frenchman, we shall be forced to arrest you.

The first step toward conflict. Of course, it isn't quite fair to fight a demented man, but it's better than nothing.

HARRY: It's all right, Captain. Mr. Quillery is for peace. He's going back to France to stop the war.
QUILLERY [to Harry]: You're not authorized to speak for me. I'm competent to say what I feel, and what I say is "Down with Fascism! Abaso Fascismo!"

After this, of course, they shoot him. The others go on dancing and pretend they are not very much impressed. But they can't fool us.

At one point Irene delivers a splendid speech to Achille, but before that point—and after it—nothing.

Another, less obvious example of static conflict can be found in Noel Coward's Design for Living.

Gilda has alternated between two lovers until her marriage to a friend of her lovers. All three men are friends. The two lovers come back to claim Gilda. Her husband is naturally outraged. The four are together now, at the end of the third act.
GILDA [blandly]: Now then!
LEO: Now then indeed!
GILDA: What's going to happen?
OTTO: Social poise again. Oh dear! Oh dear, oh dear!
GILDA: You know you both look figures of fun in pajamas!
ERNEST [the husband]: I don't believe I've ever been so acutely
irritated in my whole life.
LEO: It is annoying for you, Ernest. I do see that. I am so sorry.
OTTO: Yes, we're both sorry.
ERNEST: I think your arrogance is insufferable. I don't know what
to say. I don't know what to do. I am very, very angry. Gilda, for
heaven's sake, tell them to go!
GILDA: They wouldn't. Not if I told them until I was black in the
face!
LEO: Quite right.
OTTO: Not without you, we wouldn't.
GILDA [smiling]: That's very sweet of you both.

There is no visible development in character, hence the
conflict is static. If a character, for any reason, loses its reality,
it becomes incapable of creating rising conflict.

If we wish to portray a bore, it is not necessary to bore the
audience. Nor is it necessary to be superficial to show a super-
ficial personality. We must know what motivates a character,
even if he does not know himself. The author must not write
in a vacuum to show characters who live in one. No sophistry
will explain away this fact.

GILDA [blandly]: Now then!

"Now then" means "what is going to happen now?" and
no more than that. There is nothing in it of provocation, of
attack leading to counterattack. Even for the shallow Gilda
it is too ineffectual, and it gets the right answer: "Now then
indeed."

If Gilda's remark had imperceptible movement, Leo's re-
response had none at all. It not only fails to take up the tiny
challenge she offered; it leaves it as it was. No movement to be seen.

The next line is sarcastic, but the three “oh dears” are not only not a challenge, but an admission of the speaker’s impotence to remedy the situation. If you doubt this, look at the next line: “You both look figures of fun in those pajamas.” Apparently Otto’s sarcasm passed unnoticed. Gilda has not been touched, and the play refuses to move.

The very least the author could have done at this point was show another facet of Gilda’s character. We might have seen the motivation behind Gilda’s love life, her flippancy. But we see nothing but a superfluous comment—to be expected from “characters” who are simply manikins through whom the author speaks.

ERNEST: I don’t believe I’ve ever been so acutely irritated in my whole life.

Anyone who says such a line is harmless. He can whine, but he cannot add or detract from the sum of the play. His exclamation does not aggravate the situation. There is no threat, no action. What is a weak character? One who, for any reason, cannot make a decision.

LEO: It is annoying for you, Ernest. I do see that. I am sorry.

There is something in this line—a trace of heartlessness. Leo doesn’t give a damn about Ernest. But the conflict stays where it was. Then Otto steps in and assures Ernest that he too is sorry. If this is funny at all, it is because such an attitude, in life, would be brutal and unfeeling. The character who can employ such humor and still be heroic does not exist—and cannot create conflict.

Ernest’s next speech is revealing. The antagonist admits that he cannot put up any sort of a fight, that he must appeal to the goal (Gilda) to fight his battle for him. Gilda, Otto, and Leo want what they want and there is no one even to try
to stop them. This may be funny in a two-line gag, but it isn’t the conflict necessary for a play.

If you reread the whole quotation, you will see that at the last line the play is almost in the same position as when it started. The movement is negligible, particularly when you remember that the act goes on like this for several pages.

In *Brass Ankle*, by Du Bose Heyward, almost the whole first act is taken up with exposition. But the second and third acts make up for the bad first one. In *Design for Living* there is cause for conflict in the initial situation, but it never materializes because of the superficiality of the characters. The result is a static conflict.

4. Jumping

One of the chief dangers in any jumping conflict is that the author believes the conflict is rising smoothly. He resents any critic who insists that the conflict jumps. What are the danger signals which an author can look for? How can he tell when he is going in the wrong direction? Here are a few pointers:

No honest man will become a thief overnight; no thief will become honest in the same period of time. No sane woman will leave her husband on the spur of the moment, without previous motivation. No burglar contemplates a robbery and carries it out at the same time. No violent physical act was ever carried out without *mental preparation*. No shipwreck has ever occurred without a sound reason. Some essential part of the ship may be missing; the captain may be overworked or inexperienced or ill. Even when a ship collides with an iceberg, human negligence is involved. Read *Good Hope* by Heijermans, and see how a ship thus goes under and human tragedy reaches a new height.

If you want to avoid jumping or static conflicts, you might
as well know beforehand what road your characters have to travel.

Here are a few examples. They might go from:
- drunkenness to sobriety
- sobriety to drunkenness
- timidity to brazenness
- brazenness to timidity
- simplicity to pretentiousness
- pretentiousness to simplicity
- fidelity to infidelity, and so on.

*If you know your character has to travel from one pole to another, you are in an advantageous position to see that he or she grows at a steady rate.* You are not fumbling around; instead, your characters have a destination and they fight every inch of the way to reach it.

If your character starts from "fidelity," and with a Gargantuan leap arrives at "infidelity," omitting the intervening steps, it will be a jumping conflict, and your play will suffer.

Here is a jumping conflict:

**HE:** Do you love me?
**SHE:** Oh, I don't know.
**HE:** Don't be a dumbbell. Make up your mind, will you?
**SHE:** Smart guy, huh?
**HE:** Not so smart if I can fall for a dame like you.
**SHE:** I'll smack your face in a minute. [*She walks away.*]

*He* in this instance started from "fondness," and arrived at "sneering," without any transition at all. *She* started from "uncertainty" and leaped to "anger."

The man's character was false at the start—false because if he loved her, he could not ask for her love and say in the same breath that she is a dumbbell. If he thought her dumb in the first place, he wouldn't want her love.

Both are of the same type again—impetuous, excitable.
Transition in such characters moves with lightning speed. Before you knew it, the scene was over. Yes, you can prolong it, but since they are moving with leaps and bounds, they’ll be in each other’s hair in no time. Liliom, in Ferenc Molnár’s play, is the same type as “He” in this scene. But Liliom’s counterpart is exactly the opposite. Julie is subservient, patient, and loving.

Badly orchestrated characters usually create static or jumping conflict, although even well-orchestrated characters can jump—and frequently do—if the proper transition is missing.

If you wish to create jumping conflict, you have only to force the characters into action which is alien to them. Make them act without thinking, and you will be successful in your own way, but unsuccessful with your play.

If, for instance, you have as your premise: “A dishonored man can redeem himself through self-sacrifice,” the starting point will be a dishonored man. The goal, the same man honored, cleansed, perhaps glorified. Between these two poles lies a space, “empty” as yet. How he is going to fill this space is up to the character. If the author chooses characters who believe in, and are willing to fight for, the premise, he is on the right road. The next step will be to study them as thoroughly as possible. This study will show—a double check—if they are really capable of doing what the premise expects of them.

It is not enough if the “dishonored man” saves an old woman from fire, à la Hollywood, and is redeemed instantaneously. There must be a logical chain of events leading up to the sacrifice.

Between winter and summer come autumn and spring. Between honor and dishonor there are steps which lead from one to the other. Every step must be taken.

When Nora, in A Doll’s House, wants to leave Helmer and her children, she lets us know why. More than that, we are convinced that this is the only step she could have taken.
In life, she might have been tight-lipped; might never have said a word—just banged the door after her. If she were to do that on the stage it would be a jumping conflict. We should not understand her, although her motives might be of the best.

We must be completely in the know, and in jumping conflict our knowledge is only superficial. *Real characters must be given a chance to reveal themselves, and we must be given a chance to observe the significant changes which take place in them.*

We propose to strip the last part of the third act in A Doll's House, leaving the essentials, but still rendering it ineffectual. This is the grand finale of the play. Helmer has just told Nora that he would not permit her to bring up the children. But the bell rings and a letter arrives, containing a note and the forged bond. Helmer cries out that he is saved.

**nora:** And I?

**helmer:** You too, of course. We're both saved, both you and I. I have forgiven you, Nora.

**nora:** Thank you for your forgiveness. [*She goes out.*]

**helmer:** No, don’t go— [*looks in*] What are you doing in there?

**nora [from within]:** Taking off my fancy dress.

**helmer:** Yes, do. Try and calm yourself and make your mind easy again, my frightened little singing bird.

**nora [enters, in everyday dress]:** I have changed my things now.

**helmer:** But what for? So late as this.

**nora:** It is for the reason that I cannot remain with you any longer.

**helmer:** Nora! Nora! You are out of your mind! I won't allow it!

I forbid you!

**nora:** It is no use to forbid me anything any longer.

**helmer:** You do not love me any more.

**nora:** No.

**helmer:** Nora! And you can say that!

**nora:** It gives me great pain, but I cannot help it.

**helmer:** I see, I see. An abyss has opened between us—there is no denying it. But, Nora, would it not be possible to fill it up?
NORA: As I am now, I am no wife for you. [She takes cloak and hat and a small bag.]
HELMER: Nora, not now! Wait till tomorrow.
NORA [putting on her cloak]: I cannot spend the night in a strange man's room.
HELMER: All over! All over! Nora, shall you never think of me again?
NORA: I know I shall often think of you and the children and this house. Good-by. [She goes out through the hall.]
HELMER [sinks down on a chair at the door and buries his face in his hands]: Nora! Nora! [looks round and rises] Empty. She's gone. [The sound of a door shutting is heard from below.]

The End

What we have here is a hybrid conflict of the worst kind. It is not static, nor is it always jumping. It is a combination of jumping and rising conflict, which might easily confuse the young author. Therefore we shall examine it more closely.

There is rising conflict when Nora announces that she will leave. Helmer forbids her, but she goes just the same. This is all right. But there is jumping conflict elsewhere. The first jump is Nora's reaction to Helmer's forgiveness. She thanks him and leaves the room—leaping over an abyss to do so. Does she really mean that she is grateful, or is she being subtly sarcastic? Nora is not much good at sarcasm. She is acutely aware of the injustice done to her and therefore would not be likely to joke about it, bitterly or otherwise. Yet it does not seem like a moment for gratitude on her part. We are left wondering when she leaves the room.

When she returns and announces that she cannot remain with Helmer any longer, it is far too sudden. There has been no preparation for such a step.

But the greatest jump is Helmer's reaction to the fact that Nora no longer loves him:

I see, I see. An abyss has opened between us.
It is almost unbelievable that a man of Helmer's character would arrive at such understanding without presenting a powerful rebuttal beforehand. If you will read the original version at the end of this chapter, you will see what we mean.

Nora leaves, at the end of the scene (in our version), but it is no decision of her problem. It is a jump—an impulse. We feel no absolute necessity for her action. Perhaps it is a caprice which she will regret—and retract—tomorrow. Leaving Helmer as she does (in our version again), Nora fails to convince us, regardless of her justification. This is the inevitable result of a jumping conflict.

Whenever a conflict lags, rises jerkily, stops, or jumps, look to your premise. Is it clear cut? Is it active? Remedy any fault here, and then turn to your characters. Perhaps your protagonist is too weak to carry the burden of the play (bad orchestration). Perhaps some of your characters are not growing constantly. Don't forget that staticness is the direct result of a static character who cannot make up his mind. And don't forget that he may be static because he is not tridimensional. The genuine rising conflict is the product of characters who are well rounded in terms of the premise. Every action of such a character will be understandable and dramatic to the audience.

If your premise is “Jealousy not only destroys itself, but destroys the object of its love,” you know, or should know, that every line of your play, every move your characters make, must further the premise. Granted that there are many solutions for any given situation, your characters are permitted to choose only those which will help prove the premise. The moment you decide upon a premise, you and your characters become its slave. Each character must feel, intensely, that the action dictated by the premise is the only action possible. Moreover, the dramatist must be convinced of the absolute truth of his premise, or his characters will be the pale repeti-
tion of his undigested, superficial conviction. Remember, a play is not an imitation of life, but the essence of life. You must condense all that is important, all that is necessary. You will see, in the last part of A Doll's House, how every possibility is exhausted before Nora leaves her husband. Even if you disagree with her final decision, you understand it. For Nora, it is absolutely necessary that she leave.

When characters go round and round, without making any decision, the play will undoubtedly be a bore. But if they are in a process of growth, there is nothing to fear.

The pivotal character is responsible for the growth through conflict. Be sure that your pivotal character is relentless, cannot and will not compromise. Hamlet, Krogstad, Lavinia, Hedda Gabler, Macbeth, Iago, Manders in Ghosts, the doctors in Yellow Jack—these are such pivotal forces that compromise is out of the question. If your play jumps or becomes static, see to it that the unity of opposites is solidly established. The point is that the bond between the characters cannot be broken, except through the transformation of a trait or a characteristic in a person, or by death itself.

But let us go back to Nora once more. Step by step, Nora approached a minor climax. She builds on top of it, arriving at another climax, this time on a higher plane. She goes still higher, constantly fighting, clearing the way until she reaches the ultimate goal, which was contained in the premise.

And now, perhaps, you should read the original for yourself. The sentences italicized (disregarding stage directions, of course) are those we used in our example of jumping conflict.

A DOLL'S HOUSE

Act III

MAID: [half-dressed, comes to the door] A letter for the mistress.
HELMER: Give it to me. [Takes the letter and shuts the door.] Yes, it is from him. You shall not have it; I will read it myself.
NORA: Yes, read it.

HELMER: [standing by the lamp] I scarcely have the courage to do it. It may mean ruin for both of us. No, I must know. [Tears open the letter, runs his eye over a few lines, looks at a paper enclosed, and gives a shout of joy.] Nora! [She looks at him questioningly.] Nora!— No, I must read it once again— Yes, it is true! I am saved! Nora, I am saved!

NORA: And I?

HELMER: You too, of course; we are both saved, both you and I. Look, he sends you your bond back. He says he regrets and repents—that a happy change in his life—never mind what he says! We are saved, Nora! No one can do anything to you. Oh, Nora, Nora!—no, first I must destroy these hateful things—[Takes a look at the bond.] No, no, I won't look at it. The whole thing shall be nothing but a bad dream to me. [Tears up the bond and both letters, throws them all into the stove, and watches them burn.] There—now it doesn't exist any longer. He says that since Christmas Eve you— These must have been three dreadful days for you, Nora.

NORA: I have fought a hard fight these three days.

HELMER: And suffered agonies, and seen no way out but— No, we won't call any of those horrors to mind. We will only shout with joy, and keep saying, "It's all over! It's all over!" Listen to me, Nora. You don't seem to realize that it is all over. What is this?—such a cold, set face! My poor little Nora, I quite understand; you don't feel as if you could believe that I have forgiven you. But it is true, Nora, I swear it; I have forgiven you everything. I know that what you did, you did out of love for me.

NORA: That is true.

HELMER: You have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband. Only you had not sufficient knowledge to judge by the means you used. But do you suppose you are any the less dear to me, because you don't understand how to act on your own responsibility? No, no; only lean on me; I will advise you and direct you. I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes. You must not think any more about the hard things I said in my first moment of consternation, when I thought everything was going to over-
whelm me. I have forgiven you, Nora; I swear to you that I have
forgiven you.

NORA: Thank you for your forgiveness. [She goes out through the
door to the right.]

HELMER: No, don't go—[Looks in.] What are you doing in there?

NORA: [from within] Taking off my fancy dress.

HELMER: [standing at the open door] Yes, do. Try and calm your-
self, and make your mind easy again, my frightened little singing
bird. Be at rest, and feel secure; I have broad wings to shelter
you under. [Walks up and down by the door.] How warm and
cozy our home is, Nora. Here is the shelter for you; here I will
protect you like a hunted dove that I have saved from a hawk's
claws; I will bring peace to your poor beating heart. It will come,
little by little, Nora, believe me. Tomorrow morning you will
look upon it all quite differently; soon everything will be just
as it was before. Very soon you won't need me to assure you that
I have forgiven you; you will yourself feel the certainty that I
have done so. Can you suppose I should ever think of such a
thing as repudiating you, or even reproaching you? You have no
idea what a true man's heart is like, Nora. There is something
so indescribably sweet and satisfying, to a man, in the knowledge
that he has forgiven his wife—forgiven her freely, and with all
his heart. It seems as if that had made her, as it were, doubly his
own; he has given her a new life, so to speak; and she has, in a
way, become both wife and child to him. So you shall be for me
after this, my little scared, helpless darling. Have no anxiety
about anything, Nora; only be frank and open with me, and I
will serve as will and conscience both to you—What is this? Not
gone to bed? Have you changed your things?

NORA: [in everyday dress] Yes, Torvald, I have changed my things
now.

HELMER: But what for?—so late as this.

NORA: I shall not sleep tonight.

HELMER: But, my dear Nora—

NORA: [looking at her watch] It is not so very late. Sit down here,

    Torvald. You and I have much to say to one another. [She sits
down at one side of the table.]

HELMER: Nora—what is this—this cold, set face?
NORA: Sit down. It will take some time; I have a lot to talk over with you.

HELMER: [sits down at the opposite side of the table.] You alarm me, Nora!—and I don’t understand you.

NORA: No, that is just it. You don’t understand me, and I have never understood you either—before tonight. No, you mustn’t interrupt me. You must simply listen to what I say. Torvald, this is a settling of accounts.

HELMER: What do you mean by that?

NORA: [after a short silence] Isn’t there one thing that strikes you as strange in our sitting here like this?

HELMER: What is that?

NORA: We have been married now eight years. Does it not occur to you that this is the first time we two, you and I, husband and wife, have had a serious conversation?

HELMER: What do you mean by serious?

NORA: In all these eight years—longer than that—from the very beginning of our acquaintance, we have never exchanged a word on any serious subject.

HELMER: Was it likely that I would be continually and forever telling you about worries that you could not help me to bear?

NORA: I am not speaking about business matters. I say that we have never sat down in earnest together to try and get at the bottom of anything.

HELMER: But, dearest Nora, would it have been any good to you? 

NORA: That is just it; you have never understood me. I have been greatly wronged, Torvald—first by Papa and then by you.

HELMER: What! by us two—by us two, who have loved you better than anyone else in the world?

NORA: [shaking her head] You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.

HELMER: Nora, what do I hear you saying? 

NORA: It is perfectly true, Torvald. When I was at home with Papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions; and if I differed from him I concealed the fact, because he would not have liked it. He called me his doll-child, and he played with me just as I used to play with my dolls. And when I came to live with you—
HELMER: What sort of an expression is that to use about our marriage?

NORA: [undisturbed] I mean that I was simply transferred from Papa's hands into yours. You arranged everything according to your own taste, and so I got the same tastes as you—or else I pretended to, I am really not quite sure which—I think, sometimes the one and sometimes the other. When I look back on it, it seems to me as if I had been living here like a poor woman—just from hand to mouth. I have existed merely to perform tricks for you, Torvald. But you would have it so. You and Papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life.

HELMER: How unreasonable and how ungrateful you are. Nora! Have you not been happy here?

NORA: No, I have never been happy. I thought I was, but it has never really been so.

HELMER: Not—not happy!

NORA: No, only merry. And you have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child, and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it great fun when I played with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald.

HELMER: There is some truth in what you say—exaggerated and strained as your view of it is. But for the future it will be different. Playtime shall be over, and lesson time shall begin.

NORA: Whose lessons? Mine, or the children's?

HELMER: Both yours and the children's, my darling Nora.

NORA: Alas, Torvald, you are not the man to educate me into being a proper wife for you.

HELMER: And you can say that!

NORA: And I—how am I fitted to bring up the children?

HELMER: Nora!

NORA: Didn't you say so yourself a little while ago—that you dare not trust me to bring them up?

HELMER: In a moment of anger! Why do you pay any heed to that?

NORA: Indeed, you were perfectly right. I am not fit for the task. There is another task I must undertake first. I must try and edu-
cate myself—you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am going to leave you now.

HELMER: [springing up] What do you say?
NORA: I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me. It is for that reason that I cannot remain with you any longer.

HELMER: Nora, Nora!
NORA: I am going away from here now, at once. I am sure Christine will take me in for the night—

HELMER: You are out of your mind! I won’t allow it! I forbid you!
NORA: It is no use forbidding me anything any longer. I will take with me what belongs to myself. I will take nothing from you, either now or later.

HELMER: What sort of madness is this!
NORA: Tomorrow I shall go home—I mean to my old home. It will be easiest for me to find something to do there.

HELMER: You blind, foolish woman!
NORA: I must try and get some sense, Torvald.
HELMER: To desert your home, your husband and your children!
And you don’t consider what people will say!
NORA: I cannot consider that at all. I only know that it is necessary for me.

HELMER: It’s shocking. This is how you would neglect your most sacred duties.
NORA: What do you consider my most sacred duties?
HELMER: Do I need to tell you that? Are they not your duties to your husband and your children?
NORA: I have other duties just as sacred.
HELMER: That you have not. What duties could those be?
NORA: Duties to myself.
HELMER: Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.
NORA: I don’t believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are—or, at all events, that I must try and become one. I know quite well, Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them.
HELMER: Can you not understand your place in your own home? Have you not a reliable guide in such matters as that—have you no religion?
NORA: I am afraid, Torvald, I do not exactly know what religion is.
HELMER: What are you saying?
NORA: I know nothing but what the clergyman said, when I went to be confirmed. He told me that religion was this, and that, and the other. When I am away from all this, and am alone, I will look into that matter too. I will see if what the clergyman said is true, or, at all events, if it is true for me.
HELMER: This is unheard of in a girl of your age! But if religion cannot lead you aright, let me try and waken your conscience. I suppose you have some moral sense? Or—answer me—am I to think you have none?
NORA: I assure you, Torvald, that is not an easy question to answer. I really don’t know. The thing perplexes me altogether. I only know that you and I look at it in quite a different light. I am learning, too, that the law is quite another thing from what I supposed; but I find it impossible to convince myself that the law is right. According to it a woman has no right to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband’s life. I can’t believe that.
HELMER: You talk like a child. You don’t understand the conditions of the world in which you live.
NORA: No, I don’t. But now I am going to try. I am going to see if I can make out who is right, the world or I.
HELMER: You are ill, Nora; you are delirious; I almost think you are out of your mind.
NORA: I have never felt my mind so clear and certain as tonight.
HELMER: And is it with a clear and certain mind that you forsake your husband and your children?
NORA: Yes, it is.
HELMER: Then there is only one possible explanation.
NORA: What is that?
HELMER: You do not love me any more.
NORA: No, that is just it.
HELMER: Nora!—and you can say that?
NORA: It gives me great pain, Torvald, for you have always been so kind to me, but I cannot help it. I do not love you any more.
HELMER: [regaining his composure] Is that a clear and certain conviction too?

NORA: Yes, absolutely clear and certain. That is the reason why I will not stay here any longer.

HELMER: And can you tell me what I have done to forfeit your love?

NORA: Yes, indeed I can. It was tonight, when the wonderful thing did not happen; then I saw you were not the man I had thought you.

HELMER: Explain yourself better—I don't understand you.

NORA: I have waited so patiently for eight years; for goodness knows, I knew very well that wonderful things don't happen every day. Then this horrible misfortune came upon me; and then I felt quite certain that the wonderful thing was going to happen at last. When Krogstad's letter was lying out there, never for a moment did I imagine that you would consent to accept this man's conditions. I was so absolutely certain that you would say to him: publish the thing to the whole world. And when that was done—

HELMER: Yes, what then—when I had exposed my wife to shame and disgrace?

NORA: When that was done, I was so absolutely certain, you would come forward and take everything upon yourself, and say: I am the guilty one.

HELMER: Nora—!

NORA: You mean that I would never have accepted such a sacrifice on your part? No, of course not. But what would my assurances have been worth against yours? That is the wonderful thing which I hoped for and feared; and it was to prevent that that I wanted to kill myself.

HELMER: I would gladly work night and day for you, Nora—bear sorrow and want for your sake. But no one would sacrifice his honor for the one he loves.

NORA: It is a thing hundreds of thousands of women have done.

HELMER: Oh, you think and talk like a heedless child.

NORA: Maybe. But you neither think nor talk like the man I could bind myself to. As soon as your fear was over—and it was not fear for what threatened me, but for what might happen to you—when the whole thing was past, as far as you were concerned
it was exactly as if nothing at all had happened. Exactly as before, I was your little skylark, your doll, which you would in future treat with doubly gentle care, because it was so brittle and fragile. [Getting up] Torvald, it was then it dawned upon me that for eight years I had been living here with a strange man, and had borne him three children—Oh, I can't bear to think of it! I could tear myself into little bits!

HELMER: [sadly] I see, I see. An abyss has opened between us—there is no denying it. But, Nora, would it not be possible to fill it up?

NORA: As I am now, I am no wife for you.

HELMER: I have it in me to become a different man.

NORA: Perhaps—if your doll is taken away from you.

HELMER: But to part!—to part from you! No, no, Nora, I can't understand that idea.

NORA: [going out to the right] That makes it all the more certain that it must be done. [She comes back with her cloak and hat and a small bag which she puts on a chair by the table.]

HELMER: Nora, Nora, not now! Wait till tomorrow.

NORA: [putting on her cloak] I cannot spend the night in a strange man's room.

HELMER: But can't we live here like brother and sister—?

NORA: [putting on her hat] You know very well that would not last long. [Puts the shawl around her.] Good-by, Torvald. I won't see the little ones. I know they are in better hands than mine. As I am now, I can be of no use to them.

HELMER: But some day, Nora—some day?

NORA: How can I tell? I have no idea what is going to become of me.

HELMER: But you are my wife, whatever becomes of you.

NORA: Listen, Torvald. I have heard that when a wife deserts her husband's house, as I am doing now, he is legally freed from all obligations toward her. In any case, I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides. See, here is your ring back. Give me mine.

HELMER: That too?