NORA: That too.
HELMER: Here it is.
NORA: That's right. Now it is all over. I have put the keys here.
   The maids know all about everything in the house—better than I do. Tomorrow, after I have left her, Christine will come here
   and pack up my own things that I brought with me from home.
   I will have them sent after me.
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 the
   house.
HELMER: May I write to you, Nora?
NORA: No—never. You must not do that.
HELMER: But at least let me send you—
NORA: Nothing—nothing—
HELMER: Let me help you if you are in want.
NORA: No. I can receive nothing from a stranger.
HELMER: Nora, can I never be anything more than stranger to you?
NORA: [taking her bag] Ah, Torvald, the most wonderful thing of
   all would have to happen.
HELMER: Tell me what that would be!
NORA: Both you and I would have to be so changed that— Oh, Torvald, I don't believe any longer in wonderful things happen-
   pening.
HELMER: But I will believe in it. Tell me. So changed that?
NORA: That our life together would be a real wedlock. 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 is
gone. [A hope flashes across his mind.] The most wonderful thing
   of all—? [The sound of a door shutting is heard from below.]

Curtain

Now reread the jumping conflict once more. It is worth while to see how the elimination of transition can turn a rising conflict into a jumping one.
5. Rising

Rising conflict is the result of a clear-cut premise and well-orchestrated, three-dimensional characters, among whom unity is strongly established.

"Inflated egotism destroys itself" is the premise of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. In the end, Hedda kills herself because unwittingly she was caught in the web of her own making.

As the play opens, Tesman and Hedda, his wife, have returned from their honeymoon the preceding night. Miss Tesman, the aunt with whom he had lived, arrives early in the morning to see if everything is all right. She and her bedridden sister have mortgaged their small annuity to secure a house for the newlyweds. She thinks of Tesman as her son, and he feels that she is both father and mother to him.

TESMAN: Why, what a gorgeous bonnet you've been investing in!

[The bonnet is in his hand; he looks at it from all sides.]

MISS T.: I bought it on Hedda's account.

TESMAN: On Hedda's account? Eh?

MISS T.: Yes, so that Hedda needn't be ashamed of me if we happened to go out together. [Tesman puts down the bonnet, and Hedda at last enters. She's irritable. Miss Tesman gives a package to Tesman.]

TESMAN: Well, I declare! Have you really saved them for me, Aunt Julia? Hedda! Isn't this touching?

HEDDA: Well, what is it?

TESMAN: My old morning shoes! My slippers!

HEDDA: Indeed. I remember you often spoke of them while we were abroad.

TESMAN: Yes, I missed them terribly. [Goes up to her.] Now you shall see them, Hedda!

HEDDA: [going toward the stove] Thanks, I really don't care about it.

TESMAN: [following her] Only think—ill as she was, Aunt Rina
embroidered these for me. Oh, you can’t think of how many
associations cling to them.

**HEDDA:** [*at the table*] Scarcely for me.

**MISS T.** Of course not for Hedda, George.

**TESMAN:** Well, but now that she belongs to the family, I thought—
**HEDDA:** [*interrupting*] We shall never get on with this servant, Tes-
man. [*The servant has practically mothered Tesman.*]

**MISS T.** Not get on with Bertha?

**TESMAN:** Why, dear, what puts that in your head, eh?

**HEDDA:** [*pointing*] Look there! She has left her bonnet lying about
on a chair.

**TESMAN:** [*In consternation, drops the slippers on the floor.*] Why,
Hedda—

**HEDDA:** Just fancy, if anyone should come in and see it.

**TESMAN:** But Hedda—that’s Aunt Julia’s bonnet

**HEDDA:** Is it!

**MISS T.:** [*taking up the bonnet*] Yes, indeed it’s mine. And, what’s
more, it’s not old, Madame Hedda.

**HEDDA:** I really did not look closely at it, Miss Tesman.

**MISS T.:** [*tying on the bonnet*] Let me tell you, it’s the first time I
have worn it—the very first time.

**TESMAN:** And a very nice bonnet it is too—quite a beauty.

**MISS T.:** Oh, it’s no such great thing, George. [*Looks around her.*]
My parasol—? Oh, here. [*Takes it.*] For this is mine, too—[*mut-
ters*]—not Bertha’s.

**TESMAN:** A new bonnet and new parasol! Only think, Hedda!

**HEDDA:** Very handsome indeed.

**TESMAN:** Yes, isn’t it, eh? But, Aunty, take a good look at Hedda
before you go. See how handsome she is!

**MISS T.:** Oh, my dear boy, there’s nothing new in that. Hedda was
always lovely. [*She moves away.*]

**TESMAN:** [*following*] Yes, but have you noticed what splendid con-
dition she is in? How she has filled out on the journey?

**HEDDA:** [*crossing room*] Oh, do be quiet!

Only a few pages at the very beginning of the play, and
three full, rounded characters stand before us. We know
them; they breathe and live, whereas in *Idiot’s Delight* the
author needs two and one-half acts to bring his two main characters together to defy a hostile world in the closing scene of the play.

Why does the conflict rise in *Hedda Gabler*? First of all, there is unity of opposites; then the characters are well-rounded persons with *strong convictions*. Hedda despises Tesman and everything he stands for. She is unrelenting. She married him for convenience and uses him to attain a higher place in society. Can she corrupt him—the soul of purity and scrupulous honesty?

No playwright can line up such people—all of them so utterly different—without a well-defined premise.

Tension can be achieved through uncompromising characters in a death struggle. The premise should show the goal, and the characters should be driven to this goal, as Fate did in the Greek drama.

In *Tartuffe*, the rising conflict is attributable to Orgon, the pivotal character, who forces the conflict. He is uncompromising. To start with, he declares:

He [Tartuffe] detached my soul from these and taught me to set my heart on nothing that is here below. And now, were I to see my mother, wife, or children die, I should do so without so much as a pang.

Any man who can make such statements will create conflict—and he does.

As Helmer's belief in scrupulous honesty and civic pride precipitated his drama, Orgon's rabid intolerance brought on himself all the mishaps that befell him. We want to emphasize the "rabid intolerance." Iago in *Othello* is *relentless*. Hamlet's *bulldog tenacity* drives him on to the bitter end. Oedipus' *deep-rooted desire* to find the murderer of the king brought tragedy upon himself. Such iron-willed characters, driven by a well-understood and clearly defined premise, cannot help but lift the play to the highest pitch.
Two determined, uncompromising forces in combat will create a virile rising conflict.

Don't let anyone tell you that only certain types of conflict possess dramatic or theatrical value. Any type will do, if you have tridimensional characters with a clear-cut premise. Through conflict, these characters will reveal themselves, assume dramatic value, suspense, and all the other attributes which theatrical jargon terms "dramatic."

In Ghosts, Manders' opposition to Mrs. Alving is gentle, at first, but it slowly develops into a rising conflict.

MANDERS: Ah! There we have the outcome of your reading. Fine fruit it has borne—this abominable, subversive, free-thinking literature!

(Poor Manders. How righteous he is in his condemnation. He feels that he has uttered the last word, and Mrs. Alving will be crushed. His attack was condemnation. Now we have the counterattack, constituting conflict. The condemnation alone could not grow into conflict if the person condemned accepted it. But Mrs. Alving rejects it, hurls it back in his face.)

MRS. ALVING: You are wrong there, my friend. You are the one who made me begin to think, and I owe you my best thanks for it.

(No wonder Manders cries out in consternation, "I!" The counterattack must be stronger than the attack in order that the conflict may not be static. Mrs. Alving, therefore, acknowledges the deed, but puts the blame on her accuser.)

MRS. ALVING: Yes! By forcing me to submit to what you call my duty, and my obligations, by praising as right and just what my whole soul revolted against as it would against something abominable. That was what led me to examine your teachings critically. I only wanted to unravel one point in them, but as soon as I had got them unraveled the whole fabric came to pieces and then I realized that it was only machine-made.
(She forces him into a defensive position. He is staggered for a moment. Attack, counterattack.)

MANDERS: [softly and with emotion] Is that all that I accomplished by the hardest struggle of my life?

(Mrs. Alving offered herself to him at a critical moment. He is reminding her of his sacrifice in refusing her. This soft question is a challenge, and Mrs. Alving meets it.)

MRS. ALVING: Call it rather the most ignominious defeat of your life.

Every word carries the conflict further.

If I call someone a thief, it is an invitation to conflict, but nothing more. Just as the male is needed, with the female, for conception, so something is needed, with the challenge, for a conflict. The accused might answer, "Look who's talking," and refuse to take offense, thus creating an abortion, so far as conflict is concerned. But if he calls you a thief, in retaliation, there is the promise of a conflict.

The drama is not the image of life, but the essence. We must condense. In life, people quarrel year in, year out, without once deciding to remove the factor which causes the trouble. In drama this must be condensed to the essentials, giving the illusion of years of bickering without the superfluous dialogue.

It is interesting to note that rising conflict was achieved in Tartuffe by a method different from that in A Doll’s House. Whereas in Ibsen’s plays, conflict means actual combat between characters, in Tartuffe Molière starts with group lined up against group. Orgon’s insistence to be ruined by himself cannot be considered conflict. Nevertheless, it achieves rising tension. Let us watch him.

ORGON: It is a deed of gift, drawn up with all formality by which I make over my whole estate to you.
(This statement is certainly not an attack.)

TARTUFFE: [recoiling] To me? Oh, brother, brother, how came you to think of this?

(And this is not a counterattack, either.)

ORGON: Why, to tell you the truth, it was your story that put it into my head.

TARTUFFE: My story?

ORGON: Yes—about your friend at Lyons—I mean Limoges. Surely you have not forgotten that?

TARTUFFE: It comes back to me now. But had I thought it would prompt you to this, brother, I would have cut out my tongue ere I had told you.

ORGON: But you don’t—you can’t mean that you refuse?

TARTUFFE: Nay, how can I accept so heavy a responsibility.

ORGON: Why not? The other man did.

TARTUFFE: Ah, brother, but he was a saint, whereas I am but an unworthy vessel.

ORGON: I know none saintlier, none I would trust more entirely than you.

TARTUFFE: Were I to accept this trust, men—men of Belial—would say that I had taken a base advantage of your simplicity.

ORGON: Men know me better than that, my friend. I am not one who can be easily duped.

TARTUFFE: Not what they may say of me, brother, but of you.

ORGON: Then dismiss your fear, my friend, for it is my delight to set them gabbling. And think—think of the power for good that deed would give you. By it you could reform my unruly household, rid it altogether of the laxity and profusion that have so long vexed your tender soul.

TARTUFFE: It would indeed give me great opportunities.

ORGON: Ha! You admit that. Then is it not your duty to accept—for their sakes and mine?

TARTUFFE: I had not looked on it in that light before. It may be even as you say.

ORGON: It is so. Brother, their salvation is in your hands. Can you leave them to perish utterly?
TARTUFFE: Your arguments have overcome me, dear friend. I did not hesitate.
ORGON: Then you accept the trust?
TARTUFFE: The will of heaven be done in this as in all other things.
I accept. [*He puts the deed in his breast.*]

There is no conflict so far, but we know that not only Orgon, the dupe, will be ruined by this deed, but his lovable and decent family also. We'll watch with bated breath how Tartuffe will use this newly acquired power. This scene really is a preparation for conflict: foreshadowing conflict.

We are confronted here with a different rising conflict than we have heretofore expounded. Which approach is better? The answer is: either is good if it helps the conflict to rise. Molière achieved his rising conflict by welding the family together to defeat Tartuffe (group against group). Tartuffe's reluctance to accept Orgon's offer is hypocritical and weak. It is really no conflict at all. *But the very offer of Orgon to transfer his fortune to Tartuffe constitutes the tension and foreshadows a death struggle between him and the family.*

Come back to *Ghosts* for a moment. Manders says:

Ah! There we have the outcome of your reading. Fine fruit it has borne—this abominable, subversive, free-thinking literature!

If Mrs. Alving answered, "Really?" or "What affair is it of yours?" or "What do you know about books?" or anything of the kind which would rebuke Manders without attacking him, the conflict would at once be static. But she answers:

You are wrong there, my friend.

She gives a general denial, first, adding irony with "my friend." The next sentence is a bombshell, carrying the attack to enemy territory. It is a body blow, almost paralyzing.

You are the one who made me begin to think, and I owe you my best thanks for it.
Manders' "I!" is equivalent to "Ouch!" in the ring, or even "Foul!"

Mrs. Alving follows up her advantage, showering blows on the unfortunate Manders, winding up with an uppercut which just misses its mark. If Mrs. Alving had succeeded in annihilating her antagonist, the play would have been over. But Manders is not a mean fighter, either. When he is staggered he spars to get his wind back, and then counterattacks fiercely. This is rising conflict.

MRS. ALVING: Call it rather the most ignominious defeat of your life.

(The blow that glanced off Manders' chin.)

MANDERS: [sparring] It was the greatest victory of my life, Helen. Victory over myself.

MRS. ALVING: [tired but game] It was a wrong done to both of us.

MANDERS: [seeing an opening, rushes in] A wrong? Wrong for me to entreat you as a wife to go back to your lawful husband when you came to me, half distracted, and cried, "Here I am. Take me." Was that wrong?

The conflict is still going higher and higher, revealing the characters' inmost feelings; the forces that made them act as they did; the position in which they now stand; the direction in which they are going. Each character has a well-defined premise in life. They know what they want—and fight for it.

Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a splendid example of rising conflict. The only trouble is that the characters, although involved in a death struggle, are not deeply motivated.

If you read the synopsis at the end of this book, you will find a dynamic, irresistible force driving the characters toward their inevitable end—Lavinia to revenge her father, and Christine to free herself from her husband's bondage.
Conflict comes in waves, rising higher and higher to an awesome crescendo, overwhelming in its power—until we start to scrutinize the characters. Then, to our sorrow, we realize that all this blood and thunder was just sham. We can't believe them. They weren't living people. They were the creation of an author who has extraordinary vitality and power to make them behave as conscious living beings should. But the moment he leaves them alone they collapse from the sheer weight of their existence.

The characters go relentlessly where the author tells them to go. They have no will of their own. Lavinia hates her mother with a cold hate because that will create conflict. She finds out things about her father which would mitigate her fierce protective love for him, but she dismisses it as something nonexistent. She had to, if she was to go through with the part the author assigned to her.

Captain Brent hates the Mannons because they let his mother starve to death. But that he left her himself for years, abandoning her to her fate, is not important either. The conflict has to go on.

Christine hates her husband because her love turned to hate, and she kills him. But what made this love turn to hate? The author never explains.

O'Neill has a good reason not to divulge his secret: he doesn't know himself. He has no premise.

He imitated the Greek pattern. He thought if he substituted Fate instead of premise, he would secure a driving force which would match the classics of the Hellenic drama. He failed, because the Greek dramas have premise under the disguise of Fate, whereas O'Neill has blind Fate only, without a premise.

As we see, rising conflict can be achieved with superficial, badly motivated characters also, but this is not the play we are after. Such plays may impress us, even terrorize us, while we are in the theater. But such plays soon become only a
memory because they bear no resemblance to life as we know it. The characters are not three-dimensional.

Once more, then: rising conflict means a clear-cut premise and unity of opposites, with three-dimensional characters.

6. Movement

It is simple enough to recognize a storm as a conflict, yet what we experience and call "storm," or "tornado," is actually a climax, the result of hundreds and thousands of small conflicts, each bigger and more dangerous than the last, until they arrive at the crisis—the lull before the storm. In that last moment the decision is made, and the storm either moves on or breaks in all its fury.

When we think of any manifestation of nature, we are likely to think of it as having only one possible cause. We say that a storm starts in such and such a way, forgetting that each storm has a different background, although the results are essentially the same, just as each death arises from different conditions, although, in essence, death is death.

Every conflict consists of attack and counterattack, yet every conflict differs from every other conflict. There are small, almost imperceptible movements in every conflict—transitions—which determine the type of rising conflict you will employ. These transitions, in their turn, are determined by the individual characters. If a character is a slow thinker, or sluggish, his transition will affect the conflict by its resultant sluggishness; and since no two individuals ever think exactly alike, no two transitions, and no two conflicts, will ever be identical.

Let us watch Nora and Helmer for a while. Let us see the motivation that they themselves do not know. Why does Nora assent when that clinches Helmer's argument against her? What goes into a simple sentence?
Helmer has just found out about the forgery. He is in a rage.

**HELMER:** Miserable creature—what have you done?

(This is not an attack. He knows quite well what she has done, but is too horrified to believe it. He is struggling with himself and needs a breathing spell. But the line *foreshadows* a vicious attack to come.)

**NORA:** Let me go. You shall not suffer for my sake. You shall not take it upon yourself.

(And this is not a counterattack, yet the conflict continues to rise. She is not yet aware that Helmer has no intention of taking the blame upon himself, nor does she fully realize that he is angry with her. He has flared up, she knows, but he does not mean it. She retains that last shred of naïveté which makes her so appealing in the face of the onrushing danger. This is not a fighting sentence, then, but a transition which helps the conflict rise.)

If we did not know Helmer, his character, his moral scruples, his fanatical honesty, Nora’s struggle with Krogstad would not be conflict at all. There would be nothing to look forward to. The one question would be who will out-smart whom. *The small movement, then, becomes important only in its relation to the big movement.*

*Hay Fever* is a play which offers material for illustration. The scene we have taken from it contains no big movements. There is nothing at stake, nothing to make the little movements important. If one character loses out there is no harm done—tomorrow is another day. The fact that this is a comedy is no excuse for so serious a flaw—as proved by the further fact that this is not a good comedy.

The parenthetical comments after each speech—attack, rise, counterattack—indicate that speech’s potentialities for development into each conflict.
From *Hay Fever*, by Noel Coward:

(A family, consisting of a charming mother who is a retired actress, a charming father who is a novelist, and two charming children who are just charming, has invited guests for the week end. Mother Judith has invited her latest. Father David has invited his latest, Daughter Sorel has invited her latest, and Son Simon has invited guess who. They quarrel about sleeping arrangements until the guests arrive—four ordinary people who serve as stooges for the family.)

SOREL: I should have thought you'd be above encouraging silly, shallow young men who are infatuated by your name. [Attack.]

JUDITH: That may be true, but I shall allow no one but myself to say it. I hoped you'd grow up a good daughter to me, not a critical aunt. [Counterattack. Rise.]

SOREL: It's so terribly cheap. [Attack. Rise.]

JUDITH: Cheap? Nonsense. What about your diplomatist? [Counterattack.]

SOREL: Surely that's a little different, dear? [Static.]

JUDITH: If you mean that because you happen to be a vigorous ingenue of nineteen you have the complete monopoly of any amorous adventure there may be about, I feel it my firm duty to disillusion you. [Attack.]

SOREL: But, Mother— [Rise.]

JUDITH: Anyone would think I was eighty the way you go on. It was a great mistake not sending you to boarding schools, and you coming back and my being your elder sister. [Static.]

SIMON: It wouldn't have been any use; everyone knows we're your son and daughter. [Static.]

JUDITH: Only because I was stupid enough to dandle you about in front of cameras when you were little. I knew I should regret it. [Static.]

SIMON: I don't see any point in trying to be younger than you are. [Attack. Rise.]

JUDITH: At your age, dear, it would be indecent if you did. [Counterattack.]

SOREL: But, Mother dear, don't you see, it's awfully undignified for you to go flaunting about with young men. [Attack.]
JUDITH: I don’t flaunt about, I never have. I’ve been morally an extremely nice woman, all my life, more or less, and if dabbling gives me pleasure I don’t see why I shouldn’t dabble. [Static.]

SOREL: But it oughtn’t give you pleasure any more. [Attack.]

JUDITH: You know, Sorel, you grow more damnably feminine every day. I wish I’d brought you up differently. [Counterattack.]

SOREL: I’m proud of being feminine. [Attack.]

JUDITH: You’re a darling and I adore you [kissing her], and you’re very pretty and I’m madly jealous of you. [Static.]

SOREL: Are you really, how lovely. [Static.]

JUDITH: You will be nice to Sandy, won’t you? [Static.]

SOREL: Can’t he sleep in “little hell”? [Static.]

JUDITH: My dear, he’s frightfully athletic and all those water pipes will sap his vitality. [Static.]

SOREL: They’ll sap Richard’s vitality too. [Static.]

JUDITH: He won’t notice them, he’s probably used to scorching tropical embassies with punkahs waving and everything. [Static.]

SIMON: He’s sure to be deadly anyhow. [Static.]

SOREL: You’re getting too blasé and exclusive, Simon. [Jump.]

SIMON: Nothing of the sort, only I loathe being hearty with your men friends. [Attack.]

SOREL: You’ve never been civil to any of my friends, men or women. [Counterattack.]

SIMON: Anyhow, the Japanese room’s a woman’s room, and a woman ought to have it. [Static even for the transition it is intended to be.]

JUDITH: I promised it to Sandy—he loves everything Japanese. [Static.]

SIMON: So does Myra. [Jump.]

JUDITH: Myra! [Rise.]

SIMON: Myra Arundel, I’ve asked her down. [Rise.]

JUDITH: You’ve what? [Rise.]

Surprise! Surprise! Nobody but the audience suspected that Simon might have invited someone too. This is the point which was reached by the scene—a clear waste of several pages because there is no big movement to give meaning to the small movements. There is not much transition, either, due
to the transparency and two-dimensionality of the characters.

You wish to start an automobile—this is your premise. First you ignite the gas. A drop of gasoline will explode. If for any reason there is no further explosion (conflict), the car will remain static (as will your play). But if the gasoline flows freely, one explosion will set off another explosion (conflict creates conflict) and the engine will vibrate with a steady hum. The car (and your play) is moving.

The many small explosions will move the car ahead. Not one, or two, but many explosions are necessary to start the big movement of the wheels.

In a play, each conflict causes the one after it. Each is more intense than the one before. The play moves, propelled by the conflict created by the characters in their desire to reach their goal: the proof of the premise.

But let's go back to our old friends, Nora and Helmer. Let us see how their conflict moves and changes.

HELMER: No tragedy airs, please. [Locks the hall door] Here you shall stay and give me an explanation. Do you understand what you have done? Answer me. Do you understand what you have done?

(The lines suggest the increasing tempo. The locking of the door adds weight to his words. The whole speech is an attack.)

NORA: [Looks steadily at him and says with a growing look of coldness in her face] Yes, now I am beginning to understand thoroughly.

(Nora's answer is not a counterattack. True, attack and counterattack is the most direct, the shortest method of building a conflict. But it cannot be employed exclusively throughout a play without becoming tiresome and without ending the play far too rapidly.

/Nora's answer is negative, but we must understand why.
She is refusing to obey her lord's impatient demand for an explanation. She explains nothing, but there is the first ray of awakening in her answer, the first sign that Helmer will receive more than he bargained for. Is Nora's line a fighting one, then? Definitely. The coldness, the tone, give warning of danger ahead. But Helmer, in his fury, does not see it. Step by step he drives himself into an uncontrollable rage.)

**HELMER:** [walking about the room] What a horrible awakening! All these eight years—she who was my joy and pride—a hypocrite, a liar—worse, worse—a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all! For shame! For shame! [Nora is silent and looks steadily at him. He stops in front of her.]

(Helmer's attack is now so vicious that any interruption on Nora's part would kill the effect Ibsen has achieved. Her silence is sufficiently eloquent and speaks for her better than any line even a Shakespeare might conceive.

We see then that the conflict becomes a variation on the straight attack, counterattack. Nora's silence is a subtle counterattack, in that it is resistance in preparation for action.)

**HELMER:** I ought to have suspected that something of the sort would happen. I ought to have foreseen it. All your father's want of principle—be silent!—all your father's want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty. Now I am punished for having winked at what he did! I did it for your sake, and this is how you repay me.

(Helmer's attack is direct, overwhelming. Nora's answer is interesting.)

**NORA:** Yes, that's just it.

(Her agreement proves his point—but there is a reason. She wishes to leave. She sees for the first time that the past eight years have been a bad dream. Her answer is negative again
—not an orthodox counterattack, but the first sign of an awakening resistance. Moreover, it serves to infuriate Helmer. The man who wishes to fight and finds no opponent becomes increasingly dangerous. We do not wish to imply that Nora’s intention is to anger her husband. On the contrary. She sees, now, the hopelessness of life with him. She agrees because she is strengthened in her determination to leave, and because what he says is true, but only now does she see the implications of the truth. Ibsen uses her state to further the conflict.)

As we read on we see how Helmer, with overpowering arguments, tramples Nora down. The battle seems one-sided —seems like a prize fight in which one fighter showers blows on an apparently defenseless opponent. But Nora, instead of weakening, is waiting her turn patiently. Every blow strengthens her position, and her resistance is a counterattack in itself.

This type of conflict differs from that which we discussed earlier. It is different, but no less effective.

**QUESTION:** It is effective, all right, but I see no “difference.”

**ANSWER:** Do you remember the scene we quoted from *Ghosts*?

The scene between Manders and Mrs. Alving contained all the elements of direct conflict. The entire play was written on that line—attack, counterattack—with few exceptions. Yet we cannot make a flat statement to the effect that all superior plays should be built on that principle, because it was successful in *Ghosts*.

**QUESTION:** Why not?

**ANSWER:** Because the situation and the characters are not the same. Every conflict must be treated with regard to the characters and the situation involved. *Ghosts* starts at a high pitch. Mrs. Alving is a bitter person, worldly-wise, disillusioned. She is exactly the opposite of the gullible, spoiled, childlike Nora. These characters will certainly generate
different kinds of conflict. Mrs. Alving's conflict comes at the beginning of the play, and arises from her patience, her efforts to keep up appearances. Nora's big conflict comes at the end of the play, and arises from her ignorance of money matters. Certainly they require different treatment. But, although the type of conflict varies with the characters, there must be conflict throughout.

7. Foreshadowing Conflict

If you feel that you must read your script to a relative or friend, do so. But don't ask him to comment on it. He may know infinitely less than you do and is likely to do more harm than good. He does not have the qualifications needed to give expert advice, and you will be forcing him into an unfortunate and painful position.

If you must read your work to someone, ask that person to tell you the moment he begins to feel tired or bored. It denotes lack of conflict; lack of conflict is a dead give-away that your characters are badly orchestrated. They are not militant; they do not have unity of opposites, and there is no uncompromising pivotal character in your composition. If all these are missing, then you have no unified work,—just an accumulation of words.

You may argue that your audience is not on the high intellectual level that your writing demands for intelligent appreciation. What then? Will the above statement still stand? Yes, it still stands because the more intelligent the person the quicker he will be bored, if he can't detect a foreshadowing conflict from the very beginning.

Conflict is the heartbeat of all writing. No conflict ever existed without first foreshadowing itself. Conflict is that titanic atomic energy whereby one explosion creates a chain of explosions.
There never was a night without a twilight; a morning without a dawn; a winter without an autumn; a summer without a spring first; they all foreshadow a coming event. The foreshadowing is not necessarily the same. In fact, there never were two springs or two twilights alike.

A play without conflict creates the atmosphere of desolation, the imminence of decomposition.

Without conflict life would not be possible on earth, or, for that matter, anywhere in the universe. The technique of writing is only a replica of the universal law which governs an atom or a constellation above us.

Set any two fanatics or groups against each other and you will foreshadow conflict of breathtaking intensity.

The motion picture, Thirty Seconds over Tokyo, perfectly illustrates what we have in mind. The first two-thirds of the picture was devoid of any conflict whatsoever and still the audience sat through it as if hypnotized. What happened? What magic did the authors weave over the audience to arrest their eternal restlessness? It is really very simple. They foreshadowed conflict.

An officer tells the assembled fliers: "Boys, you’re all volunteers to perform an exceedingly dangerous mission. It is so dangerous that it would be best for the safety of all of you not to discuss your possible destination even among yourselves."

This warning is the springboard for the story. Then the characters busy themselves with a long-drawn-out training program for their promised dangerous journey ahead.

Foreshadowing is really promising; in our case, conflict.

Whether in this particular story the prolonged waiting was justified or not is beside the point. The important thing to remember is that the audience remained breathless and waited for two hours for that foreshadowed thirty seconds over Tokyo.

When a well-matched pair of fighters face each other in
the ring, the expectation runs high. The same thing goes for
the stage.

This is true, you admit, but how can you line up strong
uncompromising characters on the stage, foreshadowing con-
lict at the very beginning of a play or story?

We think this is the easiest job a writer has to face. Take
Helmer in *A Doll’s House*, for instance. His uncompromising
attitude toward the slightest delinquency foreshadows trou-
ble with the certainty of death. What will he do when he
discovers that Nora forged a signature on his behalf? Will
he relent? We don’t know. One thing is certain; there will
be trouble. *Any uncompromising character could create the
same expectancy.*

The six dead soldiers in *Bury the Dead* protest against in-
justice. Their very act foreshadows conflict. (They are un-
compromising.)

Foreshadowing conflict is really *tension* in theatrical par-
lance.

The public generally calls psychology “common sense,”
or “horse sense.” Any author who underestimates the “horse
sense” of his audience, will face a rude awakening.

A man who never heard of Freud will pass judgment on
your play while sitting alongside of a trained critic. If your
play lacks conflict no subterfuge or slick dialogue will in-
fluence this primitive member of your audience. He knows
the play is bad. How? He was bored. His horse sense, his in-
born quality to differentiate between good and bad, told him
so. He fell asleep, didn’t he? This is a sure sign the play is
bad as far as he is concerned. To us his reaction means the
play lacked conflict, or even the foreshadowing of conflict.

People distrust strangers. Only in conflict can you “prove”
yourself. In conflict your true self is revealed. On the stage,
as well as in life, every one is a stranger who does not first
“prove” himself. A person who stands by you in adversity
is a proven person. No, you cannot fool the audience. Even
an illiterate knows that politeness and smart talk are not signs of sincerity or friendship. But sacrifice is. Again, foreshadowing *any quality* of a character is as necessary as breathing to a man.

Now, if you foreshadow conflict you’re promising the very substance of existence. Since most of us play possum and hide our true selves from the world, we are interested in witnessing the things happening to those who are forced to reveal their true characters under the stress of conflict. Foreshadowing conflict is not conflict yet, but we are eagerly waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of it. In conflict we are *forced* to reveal ourselves. It seems that self-revelation of others or ourselves holds a fatal fascination for everyone.

We don’t think it is necessary to sell the idea to writers that foreshadowing is an absolute must. The important and most difficult thing is how to use it. In *Waiting for Lefty*, by Clifford Odets, for instance, the very first line promised a mounting tension.

Fatt: You’re so wrong I ain’t laughing.

Fatt and the gangsters on the platform are against a strike. The audience members,—characters in the play,—are for the strike.

Poverty forces the would-be strikers to do something for themselves. They’re bitter, determined. They’re starving. They have nothing to lose. They *have* to strike if they want to live.

On the other hand, there is Fatt and the gangster boys. If the union goes on strike, the gunmen will lose their usefulness. You see, they’re not ordinary gangsters. They are worse. They represent crooked union leadership. The fat union dues will be lost to them if a strike is called. This strike is not just a plain, everyday strike—it is a revolution.

Both sides are on the verge of losing or winning *everything*. The very determined set-up between these people creates tension, which, in our lingo foreshadows conflict.
Unrelenting people facing each other in a show-down fight foreshadows merciless conflict to the bitter end.

Determined foes, under no circumstances, can or will compromise. One must destroy the other in order to live. Add this all up; it certainly foreshadows conflict.

8. Point of Attack

When should the curtain rise? What is point of attack? When the curtain goes up, the audience wishes to know as soon as possible who these people on the stage are, what they want, why they are there. What is the relationship between them? But the characters in some plays prattle a long time before we are given a chance to know who they are and what they want.

In George and Margaret, a mediocre play of the '30's, the author spends 40 pages introducing us to the family. Then we have a hint on page 46 that one of the sons was seen going into the maid's room. The subject is then dropped. The family life moves in a well-oiled groove. Everyone is a little touched in the head. No one gives a hoot about anybody else, and on page 82, at last, we find out definitely that one of the sons was in the maid's room. Nothing serious, you know—just a casual affair.

Although the characters are well drawn—like good charcoal drawings—we wondered why they were on the stage. What did they hope to accomplish? The play is a slightly exaggerated but meticulously drawn portrait of the family in repose. The author knows how to draw, but lacks even an elementary knowledge of composition.

It is pointless to write about a person who doesn't know what he wants, or wants something only halfheartedly. Even if a person knows what he wants, but has no internal and
external necessity to achieve this desire immediately, that character will be a liability to your play.

What makes a character start a chain of events which might destroy him or help him to succeed? There is only one answer: necessity. There must be something at stake—something pressingly important.

If you have one or more characters of this kind, your point of attack cannot but be good.

*A play might start exactly at the point where a conflict will lead up to a crisis.*

*A play might start at a point where at least one character has reached a turning point in his life.*

*A play might start with a decision which will precipitate conflict.*

*A good point of attack is where something vital is at stake at the very beginning of a play.*

The beginning of *Oedipus Rex* is Oedipus' decision to find the murderer. In *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda's contempt for her husband and all he stands for is a good start. She is so positive in her contempt that it amounts to a decision *not* to be satisfied with anything the poor man does. Knowing Tesman's character, we wonder how long he will stand for the abuse. We wonder if his love will cause him to submit, or if he will rebel.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* we hear Antony's soldiers worrying over Cleopatra's domination of their general. We see immediately the conflict between his love and his leadership. Their meeting came when his career was at its height; it proves the turning point of that career. As a member of the triumvirs, he had summoned her to answer for her conduct in aiding Cassius and Brutus in the war in which they were defeated. Antony is the accuser, Cleopatra the defendant, but he falls in love with her, against his and Rome's interests.

In each of these plays—in every work which one can un-
blushingly call a play—the curtain rises when at least one character has reached a turning point in his life.

In *Macbeth* a general hears a prophecy that he will become king. It preys on his mind until he kills the rightful king. The play starts when Macbeth begins to covet the kingship (turning point).

*Once in a Lifetime* starts when the leading characters decide to break with their former activities and go to Hollywood. (This is a turning point because their savings are at stake.)

*Bury the Dead* starts when six dead soldiers decide not to let themselves be buried. (Turning point—the happiness of mankind is at stake.)

*Room Service* begins when the hotel manager decides that his brother-in-law must pay the bill which has been run up by his theatrical company. (Turning point—his job is in danger.)

*They Shall Not Die* starts when the sheriff convinces two girls that they should accuse the Scottsboro boys of rape. They decide to tell the hideous lie in order to escape going to jail for various offenses. (Turning point—their freedom is at stake.)

*Liliom* starts when the hero turns against his employees and, against his better judgment, goes to live with a little servant girl. (Turning point—his job is in danger.)

*The Tragedy of Man*, by Madach, begins when Adam breaks his promise to the Lord and eats of the forbidden fruit. (Turning point—his happiness is in danger.)

*Faust*, by Goethe, starts when Faust sells his soul to Lucifer. (Turning point—his soul is in danger.)

*The Guardsman* starts when the actor-husband, driven by jealousy, decides to impersonate a guardsman and test his wife's fidelity. The point of attack is that point at which a character must make a momentous decision.
QUESTION: What is a momentous decision?
ANSWER: One that constitutes a turning point in the character's life.

QUESTION: Yet there are plays which do not begin that way—Schnitzler's plays, for instance.

ANSWER: True. We were talking about plays in which the movement covers all the steps between two opposing poles, as, let us say, love and hate. Between these two poles there are many steps. You might decide to utilize one, two, or three steps only in that big movement, but even then you have to have a decision to start with. Necessarily the type of decision or just preparation for a decision cannot be as sweeping as in the big movement. Look in the chapter on transition, and you'll see that before one can arrive at a decision there are minutiae: doubts, hopes, vacillations. If you wish to write a drama around a transition, utilizing this preparatory state of mind, you must amplify these minutiae, enlarge them so that they are visible to the audience. A supreme knowledge of human behavior is necessary for one to write such a play.

QUESTION: Would you advise me to write such a play?
ANSWER: You should know your own strength, your own ability to cope with the problem.

QUESTION: In other words, you're not encouraging me.

ANSWER: Nor discouraging you. It is our function to tell you how to go about writing or criticizing a play—not whether you should choose a particular topic.

QUESTION: Fair enough. Can a play be written which is a combination of the preparatory and the immediate-decision types?

ANSWER: Great plays have been written in every combination.

QUESTION: Now, let me see if I've got all this straight. We must start a play at a point of decision, because that is the point at which the conflict starts and the characters are given a chance to expose themselves and the premise.
QUESTION: The point of attack must be a point of decision or preparation for a decision.
ANSWER: Yes.

QUESTION: Good orchestration and unity of opposites ensure conflict; the point of attack starts conflict. Right?
ANSWER: Yes, go on.

QUESTION: Do you think conflict is the most vital part of a play?
ANSWER: We think that no character can reveal himself without conflict—and no conflict matters without character. There is conflict simply in the choice of characters in Othello. A Moor wishes to wed the daughter of a patrician senator. Yet it would be pointless for Shakespeare to begin with an account of identities, as Sherwood does in Idiot's Delight, for instance. We shall learn who Othello and Desdemona are from their courtship. Their dialogue will tell us their backgrounds and their characters. So Shakespeare begins with Iago, from whose character conflict stems. In one brief scene we learn that he hates Othello, we learn what Othello’s position is and that Othello and Desdemona have eloped. We begin, in other words, with the knowledge of the great love between Othello and Desdemona, with an inkling of the obstacles that love has faced, and with a realization of Iago’s intention to tear down Othello’s happiness and position. If a man contemplates murder, he is not particularly interesting. But if he plots with others or alone, and decides to commit the murder, the play is started. If a man tells a woman he loves her, they can continue in that vein for hours and days. But if he says “Let’s elope,” it may be the beginning of a play. The one sentence suggests many things. Why should they elope? If she answers, “But what about your wife?” we have the key to the situation. If the man has the strength
of will to go through with his decision, conflict will follow every move he makes.

QUESTION: Why didn’t Ibsen start his play when Nora was frightened by Helmer’s illness and frantically looked for help? There was plenty of conflict while she was deciding to forge her father’s signature.

ANSWER: True. But the conflict was inside her mind, invisible. There was no antagonist.

QUESTION: There was. Helmer and Krogstad.

ANSWER: Krogstad was very willing to lend the money just because he knew the signature was forged. He wanted Helmer in his power and placed no obstacle in Nora’s way. And Helmer is the reason for the forgery, not an obstacle to it. The only thing he does at the time is suffer, which encourages Nora to get the money.

Ibsen’s choice of a point of attack was unfortunate in A Doll’s House. He should have started the play when Krogstad becomes impatient and demands his money. This pressure upon Nora reveals her character and speeds the conflict.

A play should start with the first line uttered. The characters involved will expose their natures in the course of conflict. It is bad playwriting first to marshal your evidences, drawing in the background, creating an atmosphere, before you begin the conflict. Whatever your premise, whatever the make-up of your characters, the first line spoken should start the conflict and the inevitable drive toward the proving of the premise.

QUESTION: As you know, I am writing a play—a one-act play. I have my premise, my characters are lined up and orchestrated. I have the synopsis, but still something is wrong. There is no tension in my play.
ANSWER: Let's here your premise.

QUESTION: Desperation leads to success.

ANSWER: Tell me the synopsis.

QUESTION: A young college boy, extremely shy, is madly in love with a lawyer's daughter. She loves him but respects and adores her father, too. She makes the boy understand that if her father disapproves of him, she won't marry him. The boy meets her father, who is a great wit and makes a laughingstock out of the poor boy.

ANSWER: And then what?

QUESTION: She's sorry for him, and declares that she will marry him just the same.

ANSWER: Tell me your point of attack.

QUESTION: The girl tries to persuade the boy to come to her home to meet her father. The boy resents this interference by the father and—

ANSWER: What's at stake?

QUESTION: The girl, of course.

ANSWER: Not true. If her marriage depends on her father's approval, she can't be very much in love.

QUESTION: But it is the turning point in their lives.

ANSWER: How?

QUESTION: If the father disapproves they might be separated and their happiness will be at stake.

ANSWER: I don't believe it. She's undecided, and therefore she cannot be the cause of a rising conflict.

QUESTION: But there is a rising conflict. The boy resents going there—

ANSWER: Just a moment. If I remember correctly, you established your premise as "Desperation leads to success." As you know by now, a premise is a thumbnail synopsis of your play. You have no tension because you have forgotten your premise. Your premise says one thing, your synopsis another. The premise indicates that someone's life is at stake, but not the synopsis. Why not start your play in the girl’s
home, with the boy waiting for the father? The boy is desperate, and reminds the girl what he swore to before the curtain went up.

**QUESTION:** What did he swear to?

**ANSWER:** That he would kill himself if her father disapproved of him, and his death would be on her conscience.

**QUESTION:** And then what?

**ANSWER:** You can follow your synopsis. The father is a famous wit and very shrewd. He puts the boy through the third degree. We know now the boy is so desperate that he is ready to throw away his life if he fails. His very life is at stake, and certainly this will be a turning point in his life. Everything the father or the boy say becomes important. After all, the boy will fight for his life and might do the unexpected. His shyness might vanish in the face of danger, and he might attack and confound the father. The girl is impressed and defies her father.

**QUESTION:** But can't he do this without threatening to kill himself?

**ANSWER:** Yes, but if I remember correctly, you were complaining before that your play had no tension.

**QUESTION:** True.

**ANSWER:** It had no tension because there was nothing *important at stake*. The point of attack was wrong. There are thousands of youngsters in the same predicament. Some of them forget their infatuation after a while and others seemingly consent to the wishes of their elders while seeing each other on the sly. In either case no serious thing is at stake. They are not ready to have a play written about them. Your lovers, on the other hand, are deadly serious. The boy, at least, has reached a turning point in his life. He puts everything on one card. He is worth while writing about.

Even if your premise is good, the characters well orchestrated, without the right point of attack, the play will
drag. It will drag because there was nothing vital at stake at the beginning of the play.

No doubt you have heard the old adage: "Every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end."

Any writer who has the naïveté to take this advice seriously is bound to run into trouble.

If it is true that every story has to have a beginning, then every story might have started at the conception of the characters and ended with their death.

You may protest that this is a too literal interpretation of Aristotle. Perhaps it is, but many plays met their Waterloo for the very reason that their authors, consciously or otherwise, obeyed this Aristotelian dictum.

Hamlet did not start when the curtain went up. Far from it. A murder had been committed before, and the murdered man’s ghost had just come back to demand justice.

This play opens, then, not in the beginning, but in the middle, after a dastardly act had been committed first.

You may argue that Aristotle meant that even the “middle” must have a beginning and an end. Perhaps, but if that is what he wanted to say, he certainly could have expressed himself more clearly than he did.

Doll’s House did not start when Helmer was taken ill, nor when Nora frantically tried to get money to save his life. The play did not start even when Nora forged her father’s signature to secure money, nor when Helmer returned home jobless, after recuperating. No, the play did not start during the years Nora pinched to repay the loan. The play actually started when Krogstad found out that Helmer was being given the job as manager of the bank. Then Krogstad started his blackmail, and with this, the play.

Romeo and Juliet did not start when the Montagues and Capulets started their feud. The play did not start when Romeo fell in love with Rosalind, but when Romeo, defying
death, went to the home of the Capulets and saw Juliet, the play really began.

Ghosts did not start when Mrs. Alving left her husband and went to Manders, offering herself to him and imploring help; nor when Regina's mother became pregnant through Captain Alving. The play did not start when Captain Alving died. It really started when Oswald came home, broken in body and spirit, and the ghost of his father started to haunt them again.

An author must find a character who wants something so desperately that he can't wait any longer. His needs are immediate.

Why? You have your story or play the moment you can answer authoritatively why this man must do something so urgently and immediately. Whatever it is, the motivation must have grown out of what happened before the story started. In fact, your story is possible only because it grew out of the very thing that happened before.

It is imperative that your story starts in the middle, and not under any circumstances, at the beginning.
9. Transition

I

Two or three billion years ago, the earth was a ball of fire, revolving around its own axis. It took millions of years to cool under the constant downpour of rain. The process was slow, imperceptible, but the gradual change—transition—came to pass, the crust of the earth hardened; great cataclysms pushed up hills, created valleys and ravines through which rivers could flow. Then came the unicellular forms of life, and the globe began to swarm with living things.

Near the bottom of the scale of life are the plants called thallogens, which lack proper stems and leaves. After these come the acrogens, or flowerless plants, such as the ferns which possess stems and leaves. Farther up are the flowering plants, then the polycotyledonous trees, and then what are known as our “forest trees” and fruit-bearing trees.

Nature never jumps. She works in a leisurely manner, experimenting continuously. The same natural transition can be seen in mammals.

The gap between terrestrial and aquatic mammals is bridged by the muskrat, beavers, otters and seals, which are more or less equally at home on land and in water,

says Woodruff in Animal Biology.

There are connecting links between the fish and the mammal; between the bird and the mammal; between the cave man and man today. The gradual change, transition, works everywhere, silently building storms and destroying solar systems. It helps the human embryo to become an infant, an adolescent, a young man, a middle-aged man, an old man.
Leonardo da Vinci writes in his *Notebooks*:

... And this old man, a few hours before his death, told me that he had lived a hundred years, and that he did not feel any bodily ailment other than weakness, and thus, while sitting up on a bed in the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova at Florence, without any movement or sign of anything amiss, he passed away from this life. And I made an autopsy in order to ascertain the cause of so peaceful a death, and found that it proceeded from weakness through failure of blood and of the artery that feeds the heart and the other lower members, which I found to be very parched and shrunk and withered; and the result of this autopsy I wrote down very carefully and with great ease, for the body was devoid of either fat or moisture, and these form the chief hindrance to the knowledge of its parts. ... The old who enjoy good health die through lack of sustenance. And this is brought about by the passage to the mesaraic veins becoming continually restricted by the thickening of the skin of these veins [hardening of the arteries—L.E.]: and the process continues until it affects the capillary veins which are the first to close up altogether; and from this it comes to pass that the old dread the cold more than the young, and that those who are very old have their skin the color of wood or of dried chestnut, because this is almost completely deprived of sustenance.

Here, too, transition works stealthily. The arteries are gradually blocked, through the years, the skin withers and loses its natural color.

There are two main poles in every life: birth and death. In between there is transition:

- birth—childhood
- childhood—adolescence
- adolescence—youth
- youth—manhood
- manhood—middle age
- middle age—old age
- old age—death.

Now let us see the transition between *friendship* and *murder*:
friendship—disappointment
disappointment—annoyance
annoyance—irritation
irritation—anger
anger—assault
assault—threat (to greater harm)
threat—premeditation
premeditation—murder.

Between "friendship" and "disappointment," for instance, as between the others, there are still other smaller poles with their own transitions.

If your play will go from love to hate, you have to find all the steps leading up to hate.

If you try to leap from "friendship" to "anger," you necessarily leave out "disappointment" and "annoyance." This is a jump, because you left out two steps which belong to the dramatic construction as your lungs or liver belong to your body.

Here is a scene from Ghosts where transition is handled in a masterly fashion. Manders, the priest, is greatly incensed against Engstrand, the lovable but incurable liar. Manders feels that he must even his score, once and for all, with this man who has misused his credulity.

The probable transitions will be:
anger—repudiation
or
anger—forgiveness.

Knowing Manders' character, one knows that he will forgive. Watch the natural, smooth transition in this small conflict:

ENGSTRAND: [Appears in the doorway] I humbly beg pardon, but—
MANDERS: Aha! Hm!—
MRS. ALVING: Oh, it's you, Engstrand!
ENGSTRAND: There were none of the maids about, so I took the great liberty of knocking.
MRS. ALVING: That's all right. Come in. Do you want to speak to me?

ENGSTRAND: [Coming in] No, thank you very much, ma'am. It was Mr. Manders I wanted to speak to for a moment.

MANDERS: [Stopping in front of him] Well, may I ask what it is you want?

ENGSTRAND: It's this way, Mr. Manders. We are being paid off now. And many thanks to you, Mrs. Alving. And now the work is quite finished, I thought it would be so nice and suitable if all of us, who have worked so honestly together all this time, were to finish up with a few prayers this evening.

(The consummate liar! He wants something from Manders, and knowing he can be approached only through piety, offers to pray.)

MANDERS: Prayers? Up at the orphanage?
ENGSTRAND: Yes, sir, but if it isn't agreeable to you, then—

(He is willing to withdraw. It is enough that Manders knows he has the good intention.)

MANDERS: Oh, certainly, but—hm!—

(Poor Manders! He was so angry—but what can one do when the object of his wrath approached him for prayer?)

ENGSTRAND: I have made a practice of saying a few prayers there myself each evening—

MRS. ALVING: Have you?

(Mrs. Alving knows too well his true color. She knows he is lying.)

ENGSTRAND: Yes, ma'am, now and then—just as a little edification, so to speak. But I am only a poor common man, and haven't rightly the gift, alas—and so I thought that as Mr. Manders happened to be here, perhaps—

MANDERS: Look here, Engstrand. First of all I must ask you a ques-
tion. Are you in a proper frame of mind for such a thing? Is your conscience free and untroubled?

(Manders wasn't entirely taken in by Engstrand’s hypocritical clamor for prayer.)

ENGSTRAND: Heaven have mercy on me a sinner! My conscience isn’t worth our speaking about, Mr. Manders.
MANDERS: But it is just what we must think about. What do you say to my question?
ENGSTRAND: My conscience? Well—it’s uneasy sometimes, of course.
MANDERS: Ah, you admit that at all events. Now will you tell me, without any concealment—what is your relationship to Regina?

(Engstrand always maintained that Regina was his daughter, when in reality she is the illegitimate child of the departed Captain Alving. Engstrand received seventy pounds to overlook this deficiency in his wife when he married her.)

MRS. ALVING: [Hastily] Mr. Manders!
MANDERS: [Calming her] Leave it to me!
ENGSTRAND: With Regina? Good Lord, how you frightened me!
[Looks at Mrs. Alving] There is nothing wrong with Regina, is there?
MANDERS: Let us hope not. What I want to know is, what is your relationship to her? You pass as her father, don’t you?
ENGSTRAND: [Unsteadily] Well—hm!—you know, sir, what happened between me and my poor Joanna.
MANDERS: No more distortion of the truth! Your late wife made a full confession to Mrs. Alving, before she left her service.
ENGSTRAND: What!—do you mean to say—? Did she do that after all?
MANDERS: You see it has all come out, Engstrand.
ENGSTRAND: Do you mean to say that she, who gave me her solemn oath—
MANDERS: Did she take an oath?
ENGSTRAND: Well, no—she only gave me her word, but as seriously as a woman could.
MANDERS: And all these years you have been hiding the truth from me—from me, who have had such complete and absolute faith in you.

ENGSTRAND: I am sorry to say I have, sir.

MANDERS: Did I deserve that from you, Engstrand? Haven't I been always ready to help you in word and deed as far as it lay in my power? Answer me! Is it not so?

ENGSTRAND: Indeed there's many a time I should have been very badly off without you, sir.

MANDERS: And this is the way you repay me—by causing me to make false entries in the church registers, and afterwards keeping back from me for years the information which you owed it both to me and to your sense of the truth to divulge. Your conduct has been absolutely inexcusable, Engstrand, and from today everything is at an end between us.

ENGSTRAND: [With a sigh] Yes, I can see that's what it means.

MANDERS: Yes, because how can you possibly justify what you did?

ENGSTRAND: Was the poor girl to go and increase her load of shame by talking about it? Just suppose, sir, for a moment, that your reverence was in the same predicament as my poor Joanna—

MANDERS: I'll

(And he will be in a similarly shameful position later. The scene has a direct bearing on his future conduct.)

ENGSTRAND: Good Lord, sir, I don't mean the same predicament, I mean, suppose there were something your reverence were ashamed of in the eyes of the world, so to speak. We men oughtn't to judge a poor woman too harshly, Mr. Manders.

MANDERS: But I am not doing so at all. It is you I am blaming.

ENGSTRAND: Will your reverence grant me leave to ask you a small question?

MANDERS: Ask away.

ENGSTRAND: Shouldn't you say it was right for a man to raise up the fallen?

MANDERS: Of course it is.

ENGSTRAND: And isn't a man bound to keep his word of honor?

MANDERS: Certainly he is, but—
ENGSTRAND: At the time when Joanna had her misfortune with this Englishman—or maybe he was an American or a Russian, as they call 'em—[He was not aware that the man was Captain Alving.] Well, sir, then she came to town. Poor thing, she had refused me once or twice before; she only had eyes for good-looking men in those days, and I had this crooked leg then. Your reverence will remember how I had ventured up into a dancing saloon where seafaring men were reveling in drunkenness and intoxication, as they say. And when I tried to exhort them to turn from their evil ways—

MRS. ALVING: Ahem!

(This lying is sufficiently obvious to make even Mrs. Alving utter a sound.)

MANDERS: I know, Engstrand, I know—the rough brutes threw you downstairs. You have told me about that incident before. The affliction to your leg is a credit to you.

(Manders is willing to swallow anything with a religious intent.)

ENGSTRAND: I don't want to claim credit for it, your reverence. But what I wanted to tell you was that she came there and confided in me with tears and gnashing of teeth. I can tell you, sir, it went to my heart to hear her.

MANDERS: Did it indeed, Engstrand? Well, what then?

(Manders is beginning to forget that he is angry, and transition starts.)

ENGSTRAND: Well, then I said to her, "The American is roaming about on the high seas, he is. And you, Joanna," I said, "you have committed a sin and are a fallen woman. But here stands Jacob Engstrand," I said, "on two strong legs,"—of course that was only speaking in a kind of metaphor, as it were, your reverence.

MANDERS: I quite understand. Go on.

ENGSTRAND: Well, sir, that was how I rescued her and made her
my lawful wife, so that no one should know how recklessly she had carried on with the stranger.

Manders: That was all very kindly done. The only thing I cannot justify was your bringing yourself to accept the money—


Manders: But—

Engstrand: Ah, yes! Wait a bit; I remember now. Joanna did have a trifle of money, you are quite right. But I didn’t want to know anything about that. “Fie,” I said, “on the mammon of unrighteousness, it’s the price of your sin; as for this tainted gold”—or notes, or whatever it was—“we will throw it back in the American’s face,” I said. But he had gone away and disappeared on the stormy seas, your reverence.

Manders: Was that how it was, my good fellow?

(Manders is softening perceptibly.)

Engstrand: It was, sir. So then Joanna and I decided that the money should go toward the child’s bringing up, and that’s what became of it; and I can give a faithful account of every single penny of it.

Manders: This alters the complexion of the affair very considerably.

Engstrand: That’s how it was, your reverence. And I make bold to say that I have been a good father to Regina—as far as was in my power—for I am a poor erring mortal, alas!

Manders: There, there, my dear Engstrand—

Engstrand: Yes, I do make bold to say that I brought up the child, and made my poor Joanna a loving and careful husband, as the Bible says we ought. But it never occurred to me to go to your reverence and claim credit for it or boast about it because I had done one good deed in this world. No; when Jacob Engstrand does a thing like that, he holds his tongue about it. Unfortunately, it doesn’t often happen, I know it only too well. And whenever I do come to see your reverence, I never seem to have anything but trouble and wickedness to talk about. Because, as I said just now—and I say it again—conscience can be hard on us sometimes.

Manders: Give me your hand, Jacob Engstrand.
The movement is complete. The poles were "anger" and "forgiveness." In between: transition.

Both characters are absolutely clear. Engstrand, besides being a liar, is as good a psychologist as Manders is naïve. Later, when Engstrand leaves, Mrs. Alving tells Manders, "You always will remain a big baby."

Nora, however, is a baby who grows up—and we have seen a great part of that growth in her scene with Helmer. A less skillful writer would have turned the last scene of A Doll's House into a grand display of fireworks—thus creating a jumping conflict on Nora's part. We have seen Helmer's slow development, but we have not seen Nora's in that case, and if she were to present her intention of leaving without a suitable period of transition, she would surprise us—and leave us unconvinced. It is possible, in life, that such a transition would take place in a split second of thought. But Ibsen has translated that thought into action, so that the audience can see and understand it.

It is possible that a person flares up instantaneously at the very moment the insult occurred. Even then subconsciously the person went through a mental transition. The mind received the insult, weighed the relationship between the insulter and himself; found that the insulter was an ingrate, misused their friendship and on top of it insulted him. This lightning review of their relationship made him resent his attitude. Anger and explosion followed. This mental process might have happened in a split second. The instantaneous flare up as we see it, then, wasn't a jump, but the result of a mental process, however quick.

Since there is no jump in nature there cannot be one on the stage either. A good playwright will record the minute movements of the mind as a seismograph jots down the slightest oscillation of the earth thousands of miles away.

Nora decided to leave Helmer after his terrific outburst on finding the letter from Krogstad. She might have looked
at him, in real life, horror-stricken, without saying a word. She might have turned and walked out on the raving Helmer. It is possible, but it would have been a jumping conflict and bad playwriting. The author has to take all the steps which lead to the conclusion, whether that conflict happened in just that way or in the person's mind.

You can write a play around a single transition. *The Sea Gull* and *The Cherry Orchard* are made of just such material, although we have designated the poles as a single step in a drama. Of course, such transitional plays are slow-moving, but they contain conflict, crisis, climax, on a smaller scale.

Now, between "ambition thwarted" and "resentment," there is a transition. Many authors leap from one to the other of these without a pause, feeling that the reaction is immediate. But even when the resentment is spontaneous, there is a series of minute movements, a transition, which causes the reaction.

It is these tiny, split-second movements with which we are concerned. Analyze a transition and you will find that you know the characters better.

There is a fine transition in *Tartuffe*, when this sublime villain at last has the opportunity to be alone with Orgon's wife. He has been masquerading as a saint, but at the same time he has designs on the lovely Elmire. Let us watch him—how will he bridge saintliness to proposal of illicit love and at the same time remain in character?

After desiring Elmire so long, he naturally loses control of his emotions after finding himself alone with her. He fingers her dress absent-mindedly. But Elmire is on the alert.

**ELMIRE:** Monsieur Tartuffe!

**TARTUFFE:** Satin, unless I am mistaken? And of so deliciously soft a texture! In such fine raiment doubtless was arrayed the Bride of Solomon's Song when—

**ELMIRE:** However she was arrayed, Monsieur, can be no concern of either of us!
(This rebuff cools his ardor a bit, and Tartuffe becomes more cautious.)

ELMIRE: We have other matters than lace to discuss. I want to hear from you whether it is true that you are proposing to marry my stepdaughter?

TARTUFFE: I would ask in return if such a marriage would incur your disapproval.

(He moves warily now. After the first disappointment he has to be more careful.)

ELMIRE: Why, can you possibly suppose I could approve of it?

TARTUFFE: To say the truth, Madame, I have been led to doubt it. And you must permit me to reassure you on that head. It is true that Monsieur Orgon did broach this alliance to me. But, Madame, you do not need to be told that my hopes are fixed on a far other, far higher happiness!

ELMIRE: [Relieved] Ah yes, of course. You mean that your heart is set on joys that are not of this world.

TARTUFFE: Do not misunderstand me, or perhaps I should say, do not affect to misunderstand me, Madame. That was *not* my meaning.

(He presupposes that she has an inkling of his intention. No jump. He goes smoothly toward his goal: to declare his love.)

ELMIRE: Then perhaps you will tell me what you *did* mean.

TARTUFFE: I meant, Madame, that my heart is not of marble.

ELMIRE: And is that so remarkable?

TARTUFFE: So far is it from marble, Madame, that, however it may aspire heavenward, it is not proof against the desire for earthly felicity.

(He is on the way.)

ELMIRE: If it is not, it should surely be your endeavor to make it so, Monsieur Tartuffe.
TARTUFFE: How strive against the irresistible, Madame? When we behold some perfect work of the Creator can we refrain from worshiping Him in His own image? No—and with good reason, for to refrain would be undevout.

(The ground is prepared. Now he can move to attack.)

ELMIRE: I see, you are a lover of nature.

TARTUFFE: An ardent one, Madame, when it takes so divine a shape, so enchanting a beauty as in the dazzling form I am privileged to behold. For a season I wrestled against your charms, regarding them as snares set by the Evil One for my undoing. And then it was revealed to me that, since my passion was pure, I could indulge it without either sin or shame, and offer you a heart so little worthy of your acceptance. But, such as it is, Madame, I lay it at your dainty feet, and await the decision which will either raise me to bliss unspeakable or doom me to utter despair.

(He mitigates his audacity by envisaging his possible doom if rejected. Surely, this man Tartuffe knows his psychology.)

ELMIRE: Surely, Monsieur Tartuffe, this is a somewhat surprising outburst from one of your rigid principles!

TARTUFFE: Ah, Madame, what principles would withstand such beauty! Alas! I am no Joseph!

(He skillfully puts the blame on her. No woman can be outraged if she is thought so irresistible.)

ELMIRE: Too evidently. But neither am I a Madame Potiphar, as you seem to be suggesting.

TARTUFFE: But you are, Madame, you are! Unconsciously, I am willing to believe, but a temptress none the less, and one against whom all my fastings, all my supplications on my bended knees have availed me naught! Now at last my pent-up passion hath burst its bounds, and I implore you for some sign that it is not altogether disdained. Reflect that I offer you not only a devotion without parallel, but a discretion that you may be sure will never
tarnish your fair name by so much as a breath. You need have no fear that I am one of those who boast of their good fortune.

(This very assurance of secrecy gives Tartuffe away as a designing scoundrel. But he is in character.)

ELMIRE: And have you no fear, Monsieur Tartuffe, that I may alter my husband's opinion of you by repeating this conversation to him?

TARTUFFE: Madame, I think too highly of your discretion—I mean that you have too kind a heart to injure one whose only offense is that he is unable to help adoring you.

ELMIRE: Well, how another woman might act in my place I cannot say, but I shall say nothing to my husband of this—incident, Monsieur Tartuffe.

TARTUFFE: I should be the last to advise your doing so, Madame—in the circumstances.

ELMIRE: But I shall name a price for my silence. You in return must renounce all claim to my stepdaughter's hand—however my husband may urge.

TARTUFFE: Ah, Madame, must I again assure you that you and you alone—?

ELMIRE: Wait, Monsieur Tartuffe. You are to do more than that—you are to use all your influence to bring about her marriage with Valère.

TARTUFFE: And if I do, Madame, if I do, what may I hope for as my reward?

ELMIRE: Why, my silence, to be sure.

(After this transition the scene naturally arrived where conflict had to burst forth. Damis, Orgon's son, suddenly steps between them. Damis had overheard their conversation, and he is outraged.)

DAMIS: No. There should be no hushing up of this and there shall not be, either!

ELMIRE: Damis!

TARTUFFE: My—my dear young friend. You have mistaken an innocent phrase for—I
(The attack was too sudden for Tartuffe’s comfort. For a moment he lost his bearing.)

DAMIS: Mistaken! I have heard every word that was spoken, and so shall my father. Thank heaven I am at last able to open his eyes and make him see how vile a traitor and hypocrite he has been harboring!

TARTUFFE: You do me wrong, dear young friend, you do indeed!

(It seems he is in his stride again. He withdraws into his piousness once more.)

ELMIRE: Now, Damis, listen to me. There must be no noise about this—I do not wish it talked of. I have promised him my forgiveness on condition that he behaves himself for the future, as I am sure he will. I cannot take back my promise. Indeed the matter is too absurd and trifling to make a fuss about—to your father of all people.

DAMIS: That may be your view, it is not mine. I’ve borne too much from that canting square-toes there—that schemer who has gained complete control over father, set him against both my marriage and Valère’s, and sought to turn this house into a conventicle. Now when I may never have so good a chance again!

ELMIRE: But, Damis, I assure you—

DAMIS: No. I shall do as I said, make an end once and for all of this domineering. The whip has been put in my hand, and I shall take great joy in applying it!

ELMIRE: Damis dear, if you will only be advised by me—

DAMIS: I am sorry, but I can take no advice. Father must know all.

(Orgon enters from doors at left.)

ORGON: [As he enters] What is this that I must know?

There is subtle conflict in this transition, which slowly accumulates tension as it goes along and arrives to a breaking point, in even tempo. The first high point is when Tartuffe
openly declares his love; the second, Damis' accusation of his treachery.

After Orgon's arrival, we can witness once more the transition in Tartuffe. The insidious acceptance of guilt seemingly in true Christian spirit lifts him in the esteem of Orgon, and makes him disown his son.

The conflict rises higher and higher, and between one conflict and the next conflict, there is perpetual transition, which makes dynamic conflict possible.

Years ago, the father of one of our friends passed away. We went to our friend's home after the funeral and found the family sitting about in great gloom. The women wept, the men stared at the floor stonily. The atmosphere was so depressing that we went out for a walk. We opened the door a half-hour later, on our return, and found the mourners in an uproar. They were laughing merrily—but stopped abruptly at our entrance. They were ashamed. What had happened? How had they come to laughter from such genuine sorrow?

We have met like situations since, and found the transition fascinating. Here is a scene from Dinner at Eight, by Kaufman and Ferber. We will try to trace transition in it. They start with "irritation" and go to "rage." This is Act Three, the last part of Scene One:

PACKARD: [Striding into the room] You've been acting damn funny lately, my fine lady, and I'm getting good and sick of it.

K KITTY: [Ruffled, not angry yet, but transition has started toward anger] Yeah? And so what?

PACKARD: [Doesn't mean any harm. Reads the riot act as a matter of form] I'll tell you what. I'm the works around here. I pay the bills. And you take orders from me.

K KITTY: [Considers this a challenge and counterattacks. Rising, brush in hand hanging idly] Who do you think you're talking to? That first wife of yours in Montana?

PACKARD: [Considers this a foul and doesn't like it] You leave her out of this!

K KITTY: [She smells blood. This is his weak point, and an old resent-
ment kills all her caution] That poor mealy-faced thing, with her flat chest, that never had the guts to talk up to you!

PACKARD: [Still willing to call it quits. His transition toward anger is sluggish, has to be fed] Shut up, I tell you!

KITTY: [Doing the feeding] Washing your greasy overalls, cooking and slaving for you in some lousy mining shack! No wonder she died!

PACKARD: [Becomes violently angry—a jump] God damn you!

KITTY: [Gesticulating with the hairbrush] Well, you're not going to get me that way! You're not going to step on my face to get where you want to go—you big windbag! [Turns away from him, drops her hairbrush among the bottles and jars on the dressing table.]

PACKARD: Why you cheap little piece of scum! I've got a good notion to drop you right back where I picked you up, in the checkroom of the Hottentot Club, or whatever the dirty joint was.

KITTY: Oh, no you won't! [The upward movement is swift. Shortly the transition will be complete.]

PACKARD: And then you can go home and live with your sweet-smelling family, back of the railroad tracks in Passaic. That drunken bum father and your jail-bird brother that I'm always coming through for. The next time he can go to the pen, and I'll see that he gets there.

KITTY: You'll be there ahead of him—you big crook!

PACKARD: And get this! If that sniveling, money-grubbing mother of yours comes whining around my office once more, I'm going to give orders to have her thrown the hell out of there and right down sixty flights of stairs, so help me God! [Tina has entered as Dan is almost at the end of this speech. In her hand is Kitty's evening bag, jeweled and metallic, and containing Kitty's powder compact, lipstick, cigarette case, and so forth. Finding herself in the midst of a storm, she hesitates briefly. Dan, on his last word, and coincident with Tina's entrance, snatches the bag from Tina's hand, dashes it to the floor, gives Tina a shove that sends her spinning out of the room.]

KITTY: [The transition is complete. Her first real resentment. From here she must move more quickly, her transition reaching a still higher note.] You pick that up! [For answer, Dan gives the bag
a violent kick, sending it to a corner of the room. Beside herself.] Bracelets, eh? [She takes off a three-inch jeweled band; drops it onto the floor, and kicks it viciously across the room.] That shows you what you know about women! You think if you give me a bracelet— Why do you give 'em to me! Because you've put over one of your dirty deals and want me to lug these around to show what a big guy you are! You don't do it to make me feel good; it's for you! [She does not know in what direction her anger will take her, but she hits into the dark.]

PACKARD: Oh, it is, is it! What about this place and all these clothes and fur-coats and automobiles! Go any place you want to, money to throw away! There ain't a wife in the world got it softer than you have! I picked you up out of the gutter, and this is the thanks I get!

KITTY: [Like a good hunting dog, gets the scent at last. Now she knows where she's going] Thanks for what? Dressing me up like a plush horse and leaving me to sit alone, day after day and night after night! You never take me anywheres! Always playing poker and eating dinner with your men friends—or say you are. [She is moving toward a new goal—watch her.]

PACKARD: That's a nice crack. [Still unsuspecting, he is ready to be conciliatory.]

KITTY: You're always either coming in or going out, blowing what a big guy you've just been, or going to be. You never think about me, or do any of the nice little things that women like—you never sent me a flower in your life! When I want to wear flowers I got to go out and buy 'em! [With a gesture to the door where Tina has lately stood with the orchids.] What woman wants to buy theirself flowers! You never sit and talk to me, or ask me what I've been doing, or how I am, or anything!

PACKARD: Well, go and find yourself something to do! I ain't stopping you!

KITTY: You bet you ain't! You think I sit home all day looking at bracelets! Hah! Of all the dumb bunnies! What do you think I'm doing while you're pulling your crooked deals! Just waiting for Daddy to come home! [Now the conflict reaches its crisis.]

PACKARD: What're you driving at, you little—

KITTY: You think you're the only man I know—you great big noise.
Well, you aren't! See! There's somebody that just knowing him has made me realize what a stuffed shirt you are! [Transition completed again—climax.]

PACKARD: [In an upward swing—counterattacks] Why you—you—
KITTY: [Helping him—she wants to see him furious. They are moving toward new transition and new conflict on a higher plane] You don't like that, do you, Mr. Cabinet Member?

PACKARD: [Still dazed. Transition from the impact to realization not yet completed] Do you mean to tell me that you've been putting it over on me with some other man!

KITTY: [She is in for it now. Means to go through with it] Yes! And what're you going to do about it! You big gasbag!

PACKARD: [Drawing the full breath of the outraged male] Who is it?

KITTY: [A purr of malice] Don't you wish you knew!

PACKARD: [Seizes her wrist. Kitty screams] Tell me who it is!

KITTY: I won't.

PACKARD: Tell me or I'll break every bone in your body!

KITTY: I won't! You can kill me and I won't!

PACKARD: I'll find out, I'll— [Drops her wrist.] Tina! Tina!

KITTY: She don't know. [There is a moment during which the two stand silent, waiting for the appearance of Tina. There comes slowly into the door, and a step or two into the room, a Tina, who, in spite of the expression of wondering innocence on her face, has clearly been eavesdropping. She comes forward so that she stands between the two silent figures.]

PACKARD: Who's been coming to this house?

TINA: Huh? [In the following, transition runs smoothly to form.]

KITTY: You don't know, do you, Tina?

PACKARD: Shut your face, you slut! [Turns again to Tina.] You know, and you're going to tell. What man's been coming to this house?

TINA: [A frantic shake of the head] I ain't seen nobody.

PACKARD: [Grasps her shoulder. Gives her a little shake] Yes you have. Come on, who's been here? Who was here last week? Who was here when I went to Washington?

TINA: Nobody—nobody—only the doctor.

PACKARD: No, no, I don't mean that. What man's been coming here behind my back?
TINA: I ain’t seen a soul.

KITTY: [Kills two birds with one stone—he is jealous, but he does not suspect the doctor, the man Kitty loves] Hah! What did I tell you!

PACKARD: [Looks at her as though trying to find a way of worming the truth out of her. Decides it is hopeless. Gives her a push toward the door] Get the hell out of here. [Kitty stands waiting to see what turn events will take. Packard paces a step this way and that. Wheels suddenly.] I’ll divorce you. That’s what I’ll do. I’ll divorce you, and you won’t get a cent. That’s the law for what you’ve done.

KITTY: You can’t prove anything. You’ve got to prove it first.

PACKARD: I’ll prove it. I’ll get detectives to prove it. They’ll track him down. I’d like to get hold of the guy just once. How I’d like to get my fingers around his neck. And I will too. I’ll get him. I’ll kill him and I’ll throw you out like an alley cat.

KITTY: Yeah? You’ll throw me out. Well, before you throw me out you’d better think twice. Because me, I don’t have to get detectives to prove what I’ve got on you.

PACKARD: You’ve got nothing on me.

KITTY: No? So you want to go to Washington, do you? And be a big shot, and tell the president where to get off. You want to go in politics? [Her tone becomes savage.] Well, I know about politics. And I know all about the crooked deals you bragged about. God knows I was bored stiff—the Thompson business, and gyping old man Clarke, and now this Jordan thing. Skinning him out of his eyeteeth. When I tell about those it’ll raise a pretty stink. Politics! You couldn’t get into politics. You couldn’t get in anywhere. You couldn’t get into the men’s room at the Astor.

PACKARD: You snake, you. You poisonous little rattlesnake. I’m through with you. I’ve got to go to this Ferncliff dinner, but after tonight we’re through. And I wouldn’t go there with you except that meeting Ferncliff is more important to me than you are. I’m clearing out tonight, get me? Tomorrow I send for my clothes. And you can set here and get flowers from your soulmate. We’re through. [Packard stalks off to his own room and slams the door. The transition is complete.]
This scene starts with irritation and ends with rage. In between the steps lead up from the first to the last.

An almost universal fault of mediocre writers is ignoring transition, but believing that their portrayals are true to life. It is true that transition can take place in a very short time, and in a character's mind, without the character being aware of it. But it is there, and the author must show it to be there. Melodramas and stock characters have no transition which is the lifeblood of real drama.

Eugene O'Neill invented many devices with which to convey his characters' thought to the audience. Yet none of them was as successful as the simple, transitional method employed by Ibsen and others of the great.

In The Bear, Chekhov's fine one-acter, there is a fine visible transition. Popova, the lady, has agreed to "shoot it out" with Smirnov, since she has insulted him.

SMIRNOV: It's about time we got rid of the theory that only men need pay for their insults. Devil take it, if you want equality of rights you can have it. We're going to fight it out!

POPOVA: With pistols? Very well!

SMIRNOV: This very minute.

POPOVA: This very minute! My husband had some pistols. I'll bring them here. [Is going, but turns back.] What pleasure it will give me to put a bullet into your thick head! Devil take you! [Exit.]

SMIRNOV: I'll bring her down like a chicken! I'm not a little boy or a sentimental puppy; I don't care about this "softer sex." [A movement toward weakening has started.]

LUKA: [The servant] Gracious little fathers! [Kneels] Have pity on a poor old man and go away from here. You've frightened her to death, and now you want to shoot her!

SMIRNOV: [Not hearing him] If she fights, well, that's equality of rights, emancipation, and all that! But what a woman! [The visible transition starts.] [Parodying her.] "Devil take you! I'll put a bullet into your thick head." Eh? How she reddened, how
her cheeks shone! . . . She accepted my challenge! My word, it's the first time in my life that I've seen—
LUKA: Go away, sir, and I'll always pray to God for you!
SMIRNOV: She is a woman! That's the sort I can understand! A real woman! Not a sour-faced jelly-bag, but fire, gunpowder, a rocket! I am even sorry to have to kill her!
LUKA: [Weeps] Dear—dear sir, do go away!
SMIRNOV: I absolutely like her! Absolutely! Even though her cheeks are dimpled, I like her. I am almost ready to let the debt go—and I'm not angry any longer—wonderful woman!

The transition is too obvious at the end. It lacks the subtlety which makes the transition in A Doll's House an integral part of the play.
Without transition there cannot be development or growth. T. A. Jackson writes in his book, Dialectics:

Considered qualitatively, it is . . . self-evident that the universe is never for any two successive moments the same.

To paraphrase this for our own uses, it is self-evident that a play is never for any two successive moments the same.
A character who travels from one pole to the opposite one, as from religion to atheism or vice versa, has to be on the move constantly to traverse this immense space in the allotted two hours in the theater.
Every tissue, every muscle and bone in our bodies, is rejuvenated every seven years. Our attitude and outlook on life, our hopes and dreams are also constantly changing. This transformation is so imperceptible that usually we are not even aware that it is taking place in our bodies and in our minds. This is transition: we are never, for any two successive moments, the same. And transition is the element which keeps the play moving without any breaks, jumps, or gaps. Transition connects seemingly unconnected elements, such as winter and summer, love and hate.
2

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. This is the perfect rising conflict. The jumping conflict is erratic: one, two—five, six—nine, ten.

In life there is no such thing as a jumping conflict. "Jumping to a conclusion" indicates an acceleration rather than a break in the mental processes.

Here is the opening scene from Stevedore, by Peters and Sklar. It is a short scene, but there is a jump in it. Try to find it.

FLORRIE: Gee, Bill, what’s happened to us? Why do we have to fight all the time? We never used to be like this. [She puts her hand on his arm.]

BILL: [Throwing her hand off] Aw lay off, lay off!

FLORRIE: You pig! [She begins to weep.]

BILL: You’re all alike, you little married sluts; you never know when to quit.

FLORRIE: [She slaps his face.] Don’t you talk to me like that.

BILL: All right. All right. That suits me. Only we're through now and don’t you forget it. I don’t want to see you any more and I don’t want you to come down to the office any more. Go back to that sap husband of yours and try loving him for a change. He sure needs it. [He turns to go.]

FLORRIE: Now you wait a minute, Bill Larkin.

BILL: Oh, shut up! And don’t you go calling me up with this line of yours about something important to tell me, either.

FLORRIE: I’ve got something important to tell you right now. I wrote those letters to Helen, if you want to know, And that isn’t all, either. I’m going to fix you. Just you wait and see. I’ll go to Helen and tell her just what kind of a pig she’s going to marry. You can’t treat me like that and get away with it. Maybe that stuff worked with your other women, but you picked the wrong number this time, dearie. You’re not through with me; oh, no, you’re not. Not by a hell of a ways.

BILL: You God damned— [The man seizes her by the throat in rage. She bangs his face and shrieks. Now he beats her up in a
blind fury. She shrieks louder and falls to the ground. Doors slam, voices are heard. Bill runs away.]

FREDDIE: [Offstage] Florrie, was that you? Florrie! Where are you?

Now go back to where Bill said, “Oh, shut up!” and read Florrie’s speech. She announces that she has written certain letters to the girl Bill wishes to marry, and we expect him to be enraged. But she continues with a fairly long speech, and he does nothing. This is static. The only vital line in the speech is the opening sentence, and it arouses no reaction. What does arouse him is so trivial that his reaction is a jumping conflict.

The authors subconsciously felt the need for transition, but, not understanding the principle, they reversed the process. Thereby they created a static conflict, followed by a jumping one—signs of character trouble. From his warning, “Oh, shut up!” to the end of Florrie’s speech, Bill’s mental processes are blank, so far as the audience is concerned. If she had begun: “You can’t treat me like that and get away with it,” Bill would have had a chance to react with some counterthreat. Then she would continue: “Maybe that stuff worked with your other women, but you picked the wrong number this time, dearie!” Bill’s impatience and rising temper would have caused her to hurry on to: “I’ll go to Helen and tell her just what kind of a pig she’s going to marry.” This is Bill’s chance to threaten to beat her if she approaches Helen, and the attack which causes her to speak her big line: “I wrote those letters to Helen, if you want to know.” In a completely comprehensible rage, he gives her a beating.

In this way we could have witnessed the transition from irritation to rage. As the scene stands now, the strongest line ushers in a long-winded tirade. Bill is forced to stand there, glaring at her—static—then start to choke her suddenly—jump—after a pale and inconsequential line.

Now read a scene from Black Pit, by Maltz, and try to discover another jumping conflict—lack of transition. This is a
much more serious defect than the one just discussed, because here the foundation is laid for the future conduct of the character.

PRESCOTT: [He wishes Joe to turn stool pigeon.] . . . An' all I know is if you gonna be wantin' your gravy you better stay friends with the cook. Yessir! Of course, maybe you don't care. But I'm telling you my woman ain't going hungry an' my boy ain't gonna work in the mines, neither. Well, think it over, boy. [He stands up.] I reckon it's kinda hard on you, Iola. Well—[He shrugs and goes to the door.] Let me know when your kid comes. If anything should change your mind, boy, I don't think the job'll be filled before tomorrow. [He goes out. Silence.]

IOLA: Joe—[Joe doesn't answer. She gets up and goes over to him, putting her hand on his arm.] Joe—ah don't care. Don't feel bad, ah don't want a doctor. Ah'm not afraid. [She starts to cry.] Ah won't be afraid, Joe—[She is shaken by her weeping.]

JOE: [Trying to control himself.] No cry, Iola! No cry! I no want you cry!—

IOLA: [Choking back her tears.] Ah won't, Joe—ah won't. [She sits with clenched hands. Her whole body is trembling. Joe walks the room—looks at her—walks again.]

JOE: [Suddenly turns around and yells] What you wan' me be stool pigeon?

IOLA: No—ah don't—ah don't.

JOE: You t'ink I no wan' job—no wan' eat—no wan' have doctor? You t'ink I wan' you have baby, maybe die?

IOLA: No, Joe—no—

JOE: Christus! What I'm gone do! [Silence. He walks, then sits down. He starts to beat his clenched fist on the table with increasing force. Finally he brings his hand down with all his strength, and then again there is silence.] Man got to be man. Man got to live like man. Man got have eat, got have woman, got have house—[He jumps up.] Man no can live in hole lak animal . . .

MARY: [Opens the door from the other room. Sleepily.] What be matt'r? I hear yell.

JOE: [In control of himself] No yell, Mary. Outside. We be talk.
MARY: Go sleep now.

JOE: We go sleep.

MARY: No worry. Everyt'ing's gone be okay. [She hesitates.] I pray for you. [She goes out. Silence.]

JOE: [With a little laugh] She pray for us. [A pause.] Company boss here, Iola! Man got help self li'l bit, hah? Iola, no can let Tony live in coke oven—live in hill. [In a whisper.] No can let you have li'l feller, maybe—you all time wear shawl, Iola. [He goes over to her.] You wan' hide belly? You be shame—shame for li'l feller? I no be shame. I lak li'l feller—you t'ink he be wake now? [He puts his ear to her belly.] No, he sleep. He go sleep early. He go sleep when whistle blow. [He gives a little chuckle, then he puts both hands out and strokes her face.] You lak me, Iola?

IOLA: Joe, couldn't you fool him? Mistah Prescott?— Couldn't you take the job and then just not tell him anythin'? [A pause. Joe's hands come away from her face.]

JOE: [Slowly, quietly, as though stating something they both know.] Yah. Sure, sure, Iola. I can fool heem. Take'm job. Tal heem li'l t'ing no matt'r anybody. Sure.

IOLA: [Passionately] Nobody'll know. We don't hafta tell 'em—and it'll only be for a little while. We don't hafta tell Tony.

JOE: [In the same slow way] Sure! Sure, I fool heem. Take'm job. Get doctor. Make li'l bit money. After while—say g'bye go away —sure. [A pause. He presses his head to her breast. Then, fearfully, as though trying to persuade her.] Man got live lak man, Iola. [He raises his head. With increasing pain and determination.] Man no can live in hole, lak animal!

Curtain

Now go back to the end of Joe's speech, where he says, "You lak me, Iola?" Her answer is the suggestion that he fool Mr. Prescott. She may have been thinking about this all along, but the audience is not made aware of it. When Prescott departs she tells Joe that she does not expect the sacrifice from him—and then, two pages later, she reverses her decision. The reversal is legitimate, but we must know how the change occurred.
Joe tops this apparent jump with a greater one—he agrees with her immediately. The decision is so swift as to be incredible. Doesn’t Joe know what the step entails? Doesn’t he know that he’ll certainly be an outcast and perhaps lose his life as well? Or does he feel that he can outsmart both the company and his friends? We don’t know what he thinks.

If we could see what goes on in Joe’s mind—see what he sees when he thinks of the bosses, the watchmen, the blacklists, the ostracism—his downfall would be that much more tragic to us.

With this jumping conflict, with this lack of transition, the fate of the play was sealed. Joe never was a tridimensional character. The author never gave him a fighting chance—he determined Joe’s fate, instead of letting Joe figure it out for himself.

Joe’s decision would have come after much more pondering, much more struggle between Joe and Iola, much more procrastination, and it would have resulted in a rising conflict.

Look at Nora. The transition from despair to the decision to leave is short, but it is logical. Maltz attempts transition once or twice, but his handling of it is clumsy. When Joe says: “Man got help self li’l bit,” we get the idea that he’s bending toward the stool-pigeon career. But a few lines later he says that he wouldn’t be ashamed if Iola had no shawl to cover her belly—and both Iola and the audience understand that he is not going to take the job—else why should she make the countersuggestion that he take it and fool the boss?

This jumping back and forth between negative and positive retards Joe’s growth, thus garbling the message of the play. There is no doubt that Joe is a weak character, never sure of what he wants. And, should the author say that this is just why he became a stool pigeon, we would refer him to the chapter: “Strength of Will in a Character.”

**QUESTION:** You’ve taught me that it’s of prime importance for a play to move. But do we see every turn of the wheel when
a car drives by? No, because that's not important to us as long as the car is moving. We know that the wheels are turning, because we feel the motion of the car.

**Answer:** A car may jump, stop, jump, stop, endlessly. It is in motion, all right, but such motion would shake the life out of you in a half-hour. A gearshift in a car is comparable to a transition in a play, because it is the transition between two speeds. Just as the bucking car shakes you, physically, a series of jumping conflicts shakes you emotionally. Your question was an interesting one: shall we observe every turn of the wheel? Shall we record every movement of a transition? The answer is no. It is not necessary. If you suggest a movement in transition, and this suggestion throws a light on the working of the character's mind, we think it is sufficient. It depends upon the dramatist's ability, how successfully he can compress his material in transition, giving—or suggesting—the whole movement.

10. *Crisis, Climax, Resolution*

In birth pains, there is crisis, and the birth itself, which is the climax. The outcome, whether it is death or life, will be the resolution.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo goes to the hated Capulets' home disguised with a mask, to catch a glimpse of Rosalind, his love. There he discovers another young girl so beautiful, so enchanting, that he falls madly in love with her (crisis). With dismay he finds that Juliet is the heiress of the Capulets (climax), the bitterest enemy of his family. Tybalt, nephew of Lady Capulet, discovering Romeo, attempts to kill him (resolution).

Meanwhile Juliet also learns Romeo's identity and tells her sorrows to the moon and stars. Romeo, driven by his incomparable love for Juliet, returns and hears her (crisis). They
decide to get married (climax). The next day, in the cell of Friar Lawrence, a friend of Romeo, they do get married (resolution).

In every act, crisis, climax, and resolution follow each other as day follows night. Let us look into this matter more closely in another play.

Krogstad's threat against Nora, in *A Doll's House*, is a crisis:

Let me tell you this—if I lose my position a second time, you shall lose yours with me.

Krogstad means to expose her as a forger if she does not persuade Helmer to allow him to keep his job.

This threat—whatever the outcome—will be a turning point in the life of Nora; a crisis. If she can influence Helmer to keep Krogstad in the bank, it will be the culmination of all that went before; the climax. But it will also be a climax for this scene if Helmer refuses to keep him.

I assure you it would be quite impossible for me to work with him; I literally feel physically ill when I am in the company of such people,

declares Helmer, and with this statement we have arrived at the highest point of this scene: the climax. He is adamant. Krogstad will expose her—and Helmer had said that a person who forges signatures is not fit to be a mother. Besides the scandal, she will lose Helmer, whom she loves, and her children. The resolution is: terror.

In the next scene she tries again, but Helmer once more is immovable. She accuses him of being narrow-minded. He is hurt to the quick. Crisis. It seems Helmer is determined now. He says:

Very well—I must put an end to this.

He calls the maid, and gives her a letter to mail immediately. She goes.
NORA: [Breathlessly] Torvald—what was that letter?

HELMER: Krogstad's dismissal.

NORA: Call her back, Torvald! There is still time. Oh, Torvald, call her back. Do it for my sake—for your own sake—for the children's sake! Do you hear me, Torvald? Call her back! You don't know what that letter can bring upon us.

HELMER: It's too late.

Climax. The resolution is Nora's resignation. This crisis, and climax, are on a higher plane than the previous one. Before, Helmer only threatened, but now he has fulfilled his threat. Krogstad is dismissed.

Here is the next scene, where crisis, climax, and resolution appear again on a still higher plane. Note also the perfect transition between the last crisis and the coming one.

Krogstad comes stealthily through the kitchen. He has received his dismissal. Helmer is in the other room. Nora is in terror that he may find this man here. She bolts the door and asks Krogstad to "speak low—my husband is at home."

KROGSTAD: No matter about that.

NORA: What do you want of me?

KROGSTAD: An explanation of something.

NORA: Make haste then. What is it?

KROGSTAD: You know, I suppose, that I have got my dismissal.

NORA: I couldn't prevent it, Mr. Krogstad. I fought as hard as I could on your side, but it was no good.

KROGSTAD: Does your husband love you so little, then? He knows what I can expose you to, and yet he ventures—

NORA: How can you suppose that he has any knowledge of the sort?

KROGSTAD: I didn't suppose so at all. It would not be the least like our dear Torvald Helmer to show so much courage—

NORA: Mr. Krogstad, a little respect for my husband, please.

KROGSTAD: Certainly—all the respect he deserves. But since you have kept the matter so carefully to yourself, I make bold to suppose that you have a little clearer idea than you had yesterday of what it actually is that you have done?
NORA: More than you could ever teach me.
KROGSTAD: Yes, such a bad lawyer as I am.
NORA: What is it you want of me?
KROGSTAD: Only to see how you were, Mrs. Helmer. I have been thinking about you all day long. A mere cashier, a quill-driver, a—well, a man like me—even he has a little of what is called feeling, you know.
NORA: Show it, then; think of my children.
KROGSTAD: Have you and your husband thought of mine? But never mind about that. I only wanted to tell you that you need not take this matter too seriously. In the first place there will be no accusation made on my part.
NORA: No, of course not; I was sure of that.
KROGSTAD: The whole thing can be arranged amicably; there is no reason why anyone should know anything about it. It will remain a secret between us three.
NORA: My husband must never get to know anything about it.
KROGSTAD: How will you be able to prevent it? Am I to understand that you can pay the balance that is owing?
NORA: No, not just at present.
KROGSTAD: Or perhaps that you have some expedient for raising the money soon?
NORA: No expedient that I mean to make use of.
KROGSTAD: Well, in any case, it would have been of no use to you now. If you stood there with ever so much money in your hand, I would never part with your bond.
NORA: Tell me what purpose you mean to put it to.
KROGSTAD: I shall only preserve it—keep it in my possession. No one who is not concerned in the matter shall have the slightest hint of it. So that if the thought of it has driven you to any desperate resolution—
NORA: It has.
KROGSTAD: If you had it in your mind to run away from your home—
NORA: I had.
KROGSTAD: Or even something worse—
NORA: How could you know that?
KROGSTAD: Give up the idea.
NORA: How did you know I had thought of that?
KROGSTAD: Most of us think of that at first. I did, too—but I hadn’t the courage.
NORA: [Faintly] No more had I.
KROGSTAD: [In a tone of relief] No, that’s it, isn’t it—you hadn’t the courage either?
NORA: No, I haven’t—I haven’t.
KROGSTAD: Besides, it would have been a great piece of folly. Once the first storm at home is over—I have a letter for your husband in my pocket. [The crisis begins.]
NORA: Telling him everything?
KROGSTAD: In as lenient a manner as I possibly could.
NORA: [Quickly] He mustn’t get the letter. Tear it up. I will find some means of getting money.
KROGSTAD: Excuse me, Mrs. Helmer, but I think I told you just now—
NORA: I am not speaking of what I owe you. Tell me what sum you are asking my husband for, and I will get the money.
KROGSTAD: I am not asking your husband for a penny.
NORA: What do you want, then?
KROGSTAD: I will tell you. I want to rehabilitate myself, Mrs. Helmer; I want to get on; and in that your husband must help me. For the last year and a half I have not had a hand in anything dishonorable, and all that time I have been struggling in most restricted circumstances. I was content to work my way up step by step. Now I am turned out, and I am not going to be satisfied with merely being taken into favor again. I want to get on, I tell you. I want to get into the Bank again, in a higher position. Your husband will make a place for me—
NORA: That he will never do!
KROGSTAD: He will; I know him; he dare not protest. And as soon as I am in there again with him, then you will see! Within a year I shall be the manager’s right hand. It will be Nils Krogstad and not Torvald Helmer who manages the Bank. [Crisis. Now they move toward climax.]
NORA: That’s a thing you will never see!
KROGSTAD: Do you mean that you will—?
NORA: I have courage enough for it now.
KROGSTAD: Oh, you can’t frighten me. A fine, spoilt lady like you—
NORA: You will see; you will see.
KROGSTAD: Under the ice, perhaps? Down into the cold, black water? And then, in the spring, to float up to the surface, all horrible and unrecognizable, with your hair fallen out—
NORA: You can’t frighten me.
KROGSTAD: Nor you me. People don’t do such things, Mrs. Helmer. Besides, what use would it be? I should have him completely in my power all the same.
NORA: Afterwards? When I am no longer—
KROGSTAD: Have you forgotten that it is I who have the keeping of your reputation? [Nora stands speechlessly looking at him.] Well, now, I have warned you. Do not do anything foolish. When Helmer has had my letter, I shall expect a message from him. And be sure you remember that it is your husband himself who has forced me into such ways as this again. I will never forgive him for that. Good-by, Mrs. Helmer. [Exit through the hall.]
NORA: [Goes to the hall door, opens it slightly, and listens.] He is going. He is not putting the letter in the box. Oh, no, no! that’s impossible! [Opens the door by degrees.] What is that? He is standing outside. He is not going downstairs. Is he hesitating? Can he—? [A letter drops into the box, then Krogstad’s footsteps are heard, till they die away as he goes downstairs. Nora utters a stifled cry, and runs across the room to the table by the sofa. A short pause.]
[Climax.]
NORA: In the letterbox. [Steals across to the hall door.] There it lies—Torvald, Torvald, there is no hope for us now! [Resolution. Resignation—but since there is no absolute resignation while there is life, she will try again.]

The precise moment of climax came when Krogstad dropped the letter into the mailbox.

Death is a climax. Before death is crisis, when there is hope—however slim it is. Between these two poles, transition. A turn for the worse in the patient’s condition or an improvement will fill that space.
If you desire to depict how a man burns himself to death in bed through carelessness, first show him smoking, falling asleep, and the cigarette igniting a curtain. At this moment you've arrived at crisis. Why? Because the careless man might awaken and put out the fire, or someone might smell the burning material; and if neither of these happens, he'll burn to death. It is a matter of moments in this case, but crisis can be longer.

Crisis: a state of things in which a decisive change one way or the other is impending.

Now let us examine what causes a crisis and climax. We'll take *A Doll's House*, which the reader by now knows quite well. The climax was inherent in the premise: "Inequality in marriage breeds unhappiness." In the very beginning of the play, the author knew the end, so he could consciously select his characters to fulfill this premise. We have dealt with "plot" in the chapter, "Characters Plotting Their Own Play." We have shown how Nora was forced by necessity to forge her father's name and borrow from Krogstad to save Helmer's life. If Krogstad were simply a money-lender, the drama would have missed fire. But as it was, Krogstad was a thwarted individual; he had forged a signature, as Nora did, to save his family. The thing had been hushed up somehow, but he was stigmatized. He became a shady character, but he moved heaven and earth to clear his name for the sake of his family. He worked hard to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the world. To be employed in a bank meant to Krogstad the road back to respectability.

This is how affairs stood with Krogstad when Nora approached him for money. He was lending money to others, so there was no reason why he should not lend to Nora. Besides, Helmer had been his schoolmate, although no love was lost between the two. Helmer snubbed Krogstad and was almost ashamed to know him, largely because of the rumor about his alleged forgery. It was a sweet revenge to Krogstad
to see the wife of this scrupulously respectable man in the same predicament as he had been in. When Helmer got the managership in the bank and fired Krogstad, chiefly through principle, but also because Nora dared to think that she or anyone else could influence his sound judgment, Krogstad was aroused to fighting fury. Now he wanted more than money. Now he wanted to humiliate or destroy Helmer and get on in the world himself. He has the weapon in his hand and he will use it.

As you notice, the unity of opposites is perfect in this case. Nora is by now aware of the implications of her deed, but too horror-stricken to tell Helmer, because she knows now what Helmer thinks of such a serious breach of ethics. On the other hand, there is Krogstad who, besides being humiliated, sees the good name of his children jeopardized again and is ready to fight it out even if someone has to perish as a result.

This conflict cannot be bridged by compromise. Nora offers money, as much as Krogstad is willing to name, but Krogstad is by now thoroughly aroused, and no money will suffice. He will have to be vindicated. Helmer wanted to destroy him, so he will destroy Helmer.

This unbreakable bond between the parties will ensure rising conflict, crisis, and climax. The crisis was inherent from the very beginning of the play; the choosing of these particular characters predicated it. But—the climax can still be ruined if any character weakens for some reason or other. If Helmer's love would have been greater than his responsibility, he would have listened to Nora's pleading and let Krogstad keep his job in the bank. But Helmer is Helmer, and he runs true to form.

As we see, crisis and climax follow each other, the last one always on a higher plane than the one before.

A single scene contains the exposition of premise for that particular scene, exposition of character, conflict, transition, crisis, climax, and conclusion. This procedure should be re-
peated as many times as there are scenes in your play, in an ascending scale. Let us examine the first scene of *Ghosts*, to see whether this is so.

After the curtain rises, we find Engstrand standing near the garden door, with Regina blocking his way.

**REGINA:** [*Below her breath*] What is it you want? Stay where you are. The rain is dripping off you.

**ENGSTRAND:** God's good rain, my girl.

**REGINA:** The devil's own rain, that's what it is.

The first three lines establish the antagonism between these two. Every line thereafter lets us know the relationship between them, as well as their physical, sociological, and psychological make-up. We learn that Regina is healthy, good-looking, and that Engstrand is crippled, with a flair for exaggeration and a taste for liquor. We learn that he has had many schemes for bettering his position—all of which had failed. We learn that his current premise is to open a lodging for sailors, with Regina to serve as a lure, making the dubious patrons pay for her favors. We discover that Engstrand almost killed his wife with his temper. We learn further that Regina's education has been improved in the service of the Alvings; that she and Oswald have some attachment; that she is supposed to be teaching at the orphanage for which Engstrand works.

In these first five pages one can see the perfect co-ordination of the elements we listed earlier. Engstrand's *premise* is to take Regina home with him, regardless of consequences. Regina's premise is to stay. His motivation is to use her in his business, hers is to marry Oswald. The characters are made known to us (*exposition*) through conflict. Every line spoken throws light on their traits and relationships. The very first line starts the *conflict* which culminates when Regina wins.

*Transition* is perfect in the small conflict between Regina's desire to stay and Engstrand's determination that she shall
leave. Watch closely the lines from the opening until he divulges his desire to take her home. From there, trace the movement until Regina becomes indignant, remembering the names he used to call her; from there until he tells her his plan for a "high-class eating place"; and from there, to the point where he advises her to take money from the sailors as her mother did. Crisis sets in right after his advice, and the climax follows rapidly.

REGINA: [Advancing toward him] Get out!
ENGSTRAND: [Stepping back] Here! Here!—You're not going to hit me, I suppose?
REGINA: Yes! If you talk like that of Mother, I will hit you. Get out, I tell you! [Rushes him up to the garden door.]

The climax has come about naturally, and the resolution is apparent before Engstrand leaves. He reminds her that she is his daughter, according to the Register, implying that he can force her to go home with him. Yes, here again are all the elements we were discussing before.

The next scene, between Manders and Regina, immediately follows the first scene and also contains all that is necessary. The climax comes when she offers herself to him, and poor timid Manders, in a panic, says: "Perhaps you will be so kind as to let Mrs. Alving know I am here?"

You will discover sharply defined climaxes throughout Ghosts.

Nature works dialectically; she never jumps. In nature all the dramatis personae are well orchestrated. The unity of opposites is ironbound, and the crisis and climax come in waves.

The human body is swarming with bacteria, which are kept by the white corpuscles from doing harm. The healthy body is the scene of many crises and climaxes. But if the resistance of the body is lowered, and the number of white corpuscles diminished, the bacteria multiply alarmingly and make them-
selves felt. There is constantly rising conflict between the germs and the defensive corpuscles. The crisis comes when the defensive forces are in full retreat, and it seems that the body is doomed. Just as in a play, there is the great question of whether or not the protagonist (the body) will be destroyed. The white corpuscles, although weakened, go into an offensive drive, and the body girds itself for a final decisive battle. The deadliest of all bacteria fighters steps into the fight—fever. The bacteria created the fever, and it now steps in on the side of the body. This last crisis has led to the climax, in which the body is willing to die fighting. If the body does die, we have the conclusion—burial. If the body recovers, we have the conclusion just the same—recovery.

A man steals: conflict. He is pursued: rising conflict. He is caught: crisis. He is condemned by the court: climax. Transferring him to prison is the conclusion.

It is interesting to note that “a man steals” is a climax in itself, as is “courtship” or “conception.” Even a minor climax can lead up to the major climax of a play or a life.

There is no beginning and no end. Everything in nature goes on and on. And so, in a play, the opening is not the beginning of a conflict, but the culmination of one. A decision was made, and the character experienced an inner climax. He acts upon his decision, starting a conflict which rises, changing as it goes, becoming a crisis and a climax.

We are quite certain that the universe is homogeneous in its composition. The stars, the sun, even other suns millions of miles away, are composed of the same elements as our earth. All the ninety-two elements found in our insignificant globe can be found in the light rays which travel three thousand light-years to reach us. A man contains these same elements. So does a protozoan—and everything else in nature.

The difference between star and star is the same as that between man and man: age, abundance of light, heat, and so on,
depending upon the proportion of these various elements in them. The knowledge of one star brings us closer to the knowledge of all stars. Take a drop from the ocean and you will find that it contains the same elements that constitute all oceans.

The same principle holds true for human beings—and for the drama. The shortest scene contains all the elements of a three-act play. It has its own premise which is exposed through conflict between the characters. The conflict grows through transition to crisis and climax. Crisis and climax are as periodical in a play as exposition is constant.

Let us ask the question once more: what is crisis? And we answer, “Turning point; also a state of things in which a decisive change one way or the other is impending.”

In *A Doll's House* the main crisis occurs when Helmer finds the letter from Krogstad and learns the truth. What will he do? Help Nora in her predicament? Will he understand the motivation of her act? Or, true to his character, will he condemn her? We don't know. Although we know Helmer's attitude toward such things, we also know that he loves Nora a great deal. This uncertainty will then be the crisis.

The climax, the culminating point, comes when Helmer, instead of understanding, bursts into an uncontrollable fury. The conclusion will be Nora's decision to leave Helmer.

The resolutions in *Hamlet, Macbeth*, and *Othello* are short. Almost immediately after the climax, the promise of punishment and a just future brings down the curtain. In *A Doll's House*, the resolution takes the better half of the last act. Which is better? There can be no set rule on this point, if the playwright can maintain the conflict, as Ibsen did in *A Doll's House*. 
IV

GENERAL

1. Obligatory Scene

A scientist died the other day—a man who added to the world’s knowledge. Let me tell you about his life, and then I want you to tell me which phase of his history was most important.

He was conceived. He was born healthy, but when he was four years old, he became ill of typhoid fever. As a result, his heart was weakened. When the boy was seven, his father died, and his mother was forced to work in a factory. The neighbors cared for him, but he suffered from malnutrition.

Wandering alone through the streets one day he ran in front of a car. Both his legs were broken, and he was confined to bed, first at the hospital, then at home. He whiled away the hours by reading more than the average boy of his age. At ten he read philosophy; at fourteen he decided to be a chemist. His mother worked hard, but could not afford to send him to school.

He was well now, and he ran errands so that he might attend night school. At seventeen he won twenty-five dollars for an essay on biochemistry. When he was eighteen he met a man who recognized his potentialities and sent him to college.

He progressed rapidly, but his benefactor was angry when the young man fell in love and married. With financial support withdrawn, the boy managed to obtain work as a laborer in a chemical factory. At twenty he was a father, with a salary
far too small to support his family. He undertook additional work and broke down. His wife left him with the child and went back to her family. He was bitter, contemplated suicide, but by twenty-five we find him back at night school, completing his studies. His wife had divorced him, and his weak heart was troubling him.

At thirty he remarried. The woman, five years his senior, was a teacher who understood his ambitions. He built a small laboratory at home and went to work on his theories. Success came almost immediately. A big company encouraged him in his inventions, and when he died at sixty, he was acknowledged the most prolific inventor of his time.

Now, which was the most important phase of his life?

**YOUNG LADY:** Meeting the schoolteacher, of course. This gave him the chance to experiment—and succeed.

**I:** What about the accident which broke his legs? He might have been killed.

**YOUNG LADY:** True. If he had died, there wouldn't have been any success story. This is an important phase too.

**I:** How about his wife's divorcing him?

**YOUNG LADY:** I see. If she hadn't divorced him, he couldn't have remarried.

**I:** He had a breakdown, remember. If he hadn't, she might have never thought of divorce. If his heart hadn't been weakened by typhoid, he might have been able to hold several jobs at once, and his wife would not have left him. He might have had more children and remained a laborer. Now which phase was most important?

**YOUNG LADY:** His birth.

**I:** What about the conception of the child?

**YOUNG LADY:** I see. Of course, that was the most important phase.

**I:** Just a second: suppose his mother had died carrying him in her womb?

**YOUNG LADY:** What are you driving at?
I: I am trying to find the most important phase of this man's life.

Young Lady: It seems to me that there is no such thing as a most important phase, since each phase grows out of the one before it. Every phase is equally important.

I: Isn't it true, then, that each phase is the result of many events at a specific time?

Young Lady: Yes.

I: Each phase, then, is dependent on the one before it?

Young Lady: It seems so.

I: Then we can safely say that there is no phase which is more important than the others?

Young Lady: Yes—but why are you taking this roundabout way to our discussion of the obligatory scene?

I: Because all textbook writers seem to agree that the obligatory scene is the scene which a play must have. It is expected. It is the scene for which everyone is waiting, the scene which has been promised throughout and which cannot be eliminated. In other words, the play builds to an inevitable scene which will tower over all the others. There is such a scene in A Doll's House when Helmer takes the letter out of the mailbox.

Young Lady: Don't you approve of it?

I: I don't approve of the concept, because every scene in a play is obligatory. Do you understand why?

Young Lady: Why?

I: Because if Helmer hadn't been ill, Nora wouldn't have forged the signature, Krogstad would have had no excuse to come to the house demanding money, there would have been no complications, Krogstad never would have written the letter, Helmer would never have opened it, and—

Young Lady: What you say is true, but I agree with Lawson when he says: "No play can fail to provide a point of concentration toward which the maximum expectation is aroused."
OBLIGATORY SCENE

1: True, but misleading. If a play has a premise, only the proving of the premise should create a "point of concentration toward which the maximum expectation is aroused." What are we interested in, anyway—an obligatory scene or the proving of the premise? Since the play grew from the premise, naturally the proving of the premise will be the "obligatory scene." Many obligatory scenes misfired because there was an ambiguous premise or no premise at all, and the audience had nothing to wait for.

"Ruthless ambition destroys itself" is the premise of Macbeth. The proving of this premise will provide a "point of concentration toward which the maximum expectation is aroused." Every action brings forth a reaction. Ruthlessness carries in itself its own destruction—to prove this is obligatory. If for any reason this natural sequence is delayed or omitted, the play will suffer.

There is no moment in a play which does not grow from the one before it. Any scene should be supreme in its moment. Only an integrated scene has the vitality to make us eager for the next. The difference between scenes is that the vehemence of each should mount over that of the last. If we consider only the obligatory scene, we might be likely to concentrate on just one tense scene in a play, forgetting that the scenes before it need equal attention. Each scene contains the same elements as the whole.

The play as a whole will rise continuously, reaching a pitch which will be the culmination of the entire drama. This scene will be more tense than any other, but not to the detriment of any previous scene, or the play will suffer.

The success of the scientist we were talking about can be measured only by the steps leading up to it. Any phase of his life might have been the last one, culminating in failure or death. Lawson writes: "The obligatory scene is the immediate goal toward which the play is driving." Not true. The im-
mediate goal is the proving of the premise, and nothing else. Statements like Lawson's will obscure the issue.

The scientist wished to succeed, just as a play must prove its premise, but there are issues at hand which must be dealt with first, and as well as possible. The obligatory scene must not be treated as an independent issue. Character and its determinants must be taken into account. "The climax has its roots in the social conception. The obligatory scene is rooted in activity, it is the physical outgrowth of the conflict," says Lawson.

All activity, physical or otherwise, must have its roots in social conception. A flower is not buried in the soil, but it would not exist if it had not grown on a stem with roots in the soil. Not one but many obligatory scenes created the final clash, the main crisis—the proving of the premise—which Lawson and others mistakenly call the obligatory scene.

2. Exposition

There is a mistaken idea that exposition is another name for the beginning of a play. Textbook writers tell us that we must establish mood, atmosphere, background, before our action begins. They tell us how characters should make their entrances, what they should say, how they should behave to impress and hold the audience. And while all this seems very helpful at first, it leads to confusion.

What does Webster's say?

Exposition: a setting forth of the meaning or purpose of a writing; designed to carry information.

And March's Thesaurus?

Exposition: the act of exposing.

Now then, what do we want to expose? The premise? The atmosphere? The character's background? The plot? The
scenery? The mood? The answer is, we must expose all these at once.

If we choose only "atmosphere," the question arises almost immediately: who lives in this atmosphere? If we answer: a lawyer from New York, we are a step nearer to establishing the atmosphere.

If we pursue the question further, and ask what kind of man this lawyer is, we shall learn that he is a man of integrity, uncompromising, and a failure. We shall learn that his father was a tailor who lived in poverty so that his son might become a professional man. Without once mentioning "atmosphere" in the questions we ask ourselves, and the answers we give, we shall be on the way to establishing it. If we become still more inquisitive about this lawyer, we shall find out everything about him: his friends, ambitions, station in life, immediate premise, and mood at the time.

The more we know about the man, the more we shall know about the mood, locale, atmosphere, background, and plot.

It would seem, then, that what we want to expose is the character of whom we are writing. We want the audience to know his goal, since through knowing what he wants they will know a lot about what he is. We need not expose the mood, or any of the other stock subjects. They are an integral part of the whole play; they are established when the character tries to prove his premise.

"Exposition" itself is part of the whole play, and not simply a fixture to be used at the beginning and then discarded. Yet textbooks on writing deal with exposition as if it were a separate element in dramatic construction.

Moreover, "exposition" should proceed constantly, without interruption, to the very end of the play.

In the beginning of A Doll's House Nora exposes herself through conflict as a naïve, spoiled child who doesn't know much about the outside world. Ibsen achieves this without having a servant tell the new butler who their masters are
while instructing him how to behave. There are no telephone conversations informing the audience that Mr. X has such a fiery temper that heaven knows what he will do if he hears what is happening.

Reading aloud a letter to expose the background of a character is also a poor device. All these makeshift tricks are not only bad but unnecessary.

When Krogstad enters to demand money from Nora, the ensuing threat, her reaction to this threat, reveal unmistakably who Krogstad and Nora are. They expose themselves through conflict—and will expose themselves throughout the play.

Says George Pierce Baker:

First we arouse emotion in an audience by mere physical action; by physical action which also develops the story, or illustrates character, or does both.

In a good play physical action must do both of those things and many, many more.

Percival Wilde, in his *Craftsmanship*, writes of "Exposition":

Closely akin to the establishment of mood is the creation of atmosphere.

Make this advice specific and you have something like this: "In your play about starving share-croppers, be sure not to have them wear full-dress. It is better to put them in rags and show them in their tumbledown shacks to establish atmosphere. Insist that the costume designer avoid the use of diamonds, lest it give the impression of wealth and thus confuse the audience."

Mr. Wilde continues with this crowning piece of advice:

Action may always be interrupted by exposition when the latter is of the same or of a greater degree of interest.
But if you read any good play, you will notice that the exposition is uninterrupted, continuous to the drop of the last curtain. Moreover, by action he means conflict.

Whatever a character does, or does not do, whatever he says or does not say, reveals him. If he decides to conceal his identity, if he lies or tells the truth, if he steals or does not steal, he is forever revealing himself. The moment you stop exposition in any part of a play, the character stops growing, and, with it, the play.

"Exposition," as the word is generally used, is misleading. If our great writers had taken the advice of the "authorities," and confined exposition to the opening of the play, or to odd spots between action, the greatest characters would have died stillborn. Helmer's big exposition scene comes at the end of the play—and could not have come anywhere else. Mrs. Alving kills her son at the end of Ghosts because we have seen her growth through uninterrupted exposition. Nor does it end there. Mrs. Alving could go on for the rest of her life, exposing herself constantly, as everyone does.

What most teachers call exposition, we prefer to call "point of attack."

**QUESTION:** I, for my part, accept your suggestion. But I see no harm in using "atmosphere, mood, and setting," if those terms clarify things for the beginner.

**ANSWER:** But they clarify nothing. They confuse. If you worry about mood, you will neglect character study. William Archer says, in his Playmaking:

... The art of so unfolding the drama of the past as to make the gradual revelation no mere preface or prologue to the drama of the present, but an integral part of its action.

If you follow this advice, you cannot stop here, there, anywhere, because your character is always involved in vital action, and action, any kind of action (conflict), is exposition of
a character. If for any reason a character is not in conflict, the exposition—as everything else in the play—stops right then and there. In other words, conflict is really “exposition.”

3. Dialogue

Students in my playwriting class submitted papers on “Dialogue.” Miss Jeanne Michael wrote one which was so clear cut, terse, and to the point that we feel we must quote from it. Here it is:

In a play, dialogue is the chief means by which the premise is proved, the characters revealed, and the conflict carried. It is vital that the dialogue be good, since it is the part of the play which is most apparent to the audience.

But the playwright, acknowledging that a play is not good with poor dialogue, must also acknowledge that really fine dialogue is impossible unless it follows clearly and validly from the character that uses it; unless it serves to show, naturally and without strain, what has happened to the characters that is important to the action of the play.

Only a rising conflict will produce healthy dialogue. We have all experienced the long, dull period when characters sit about on a stage, talking endlessly, trying to fill the space between one conflict and the next. If the author had provided the necessary transition, there would have been no need for this bridge of chitchat. And no matter how clever connective dialogue is, it is always very shaky because it has no solid foundation.

On the other hand, we have the shallow dialogue which results from static conflict. Neither of the opponents is going to win this motionless battle, and their dialogue has no place to go. One witty thrust immediately capped by another throws neither of the combatants over, and the characters—although
it is a rare “witty” play that has living characters—freeze into standard types that never grow. The characters and dialogue in high comedy are often of this nature, which is why so few society dramas are lasting plays.

Dialogue must reveal character. Every speech should be the product of the speaker’s three dimensions, telling us what he is, hinting at what he will be. Shakespeare’s characters grow throughout, but they do not startle us, since their first speeches suggest the stuff of which the last will be made. So, when Shylock shows himself avaricious in his first appearance, we are justified in suspecting that his behavior at the end will be the result of his avariciousness in conflict with the forces around it.

We have no notebooks left by Shakespeare or Sophocles, describing their protagonists. We have no diary written by the Prince of Denmark or the King of Thebes. But we have pages of dynamic dialogue telling most clearly how Hamlet thought, what Oedipus’ problem was.

Dialogue must reveal background. The first lines spoken by Sophocles’ Antigone are:

Sister, mine own dear sister! O Ismenel
Of all the ills bequeathed by Oedipus
What is there Zeus yet faileth to fulfill
On us twain while we live?

carrying immediately the relationship between the characters, their ancestry, their religious beliefs, and their mood at the moment.

Clifford Odets handles this function of dialogue expertly in the opening scene of *Awake and Sing*, when Ralphie says: “All my life I wanted a pair of black and white shoes and I can’t get them. It’s crazy.” There you have economic background, as well as something of his personality. Dialogue must give this, and it must begin to give it from the moment the curtain goes up.

Dialogue must foreshadow coming events. In the murder
play there must be motivation and often preparatory information as to the actual crime. For instance:

The sweet young thing kills the villain with a nail file. Simple enough? Not unless you show logically that the girl in some way knew of the existence of the file and knew that it was sharp—else it might not occur to her to use it as a weapon. And her original discovery of the file and its potentialities must be dialectically valid, not casual. It must be within her character to handle the weapon—and to comment if she sticks herself with it. The audience likes to know what is going on, and dialogue is one of the best ways of giving information.

Dialogue, then, grows from the character and the conflict, and, in its turn, reveals the character and carries the action. These are its basic functions, but they merely open the subject. There are many things the playwright must know to keep his dialogue from falling flat.

Save words. Art is selective, not photographic, and your point will carry further if unhampered by unnecessary verbiage. A "talky" play is the sign of internal trouble—trouble coming from poor preliminary work. A play is talky because the characters have ceased to grow and the conflict has stopped moving. Hence the dialogue can only mill around and around, boring the audience and forcing the director to devise business for the actors, in the vain hope of diverting the unfortunate playgoers.

Sacrifice "brilliance" for character, if need be, rather than character for brilliance. Dialogue must come from the character, and no bon mot is worth the death of a character you have created. It is possible to have lively, clever, moving dialogue without the loss of a single growing character.

Let the man speak in the language of his own world. Let the mechanic speak in terms of machines, and the race-track tout of bets and horses. Don't carry occupational imagery to ridiculous lengths, but don't try to do without it, or any dia-