logue you achieve will be shallow and worthless. Mixing imagery is a device which may be successfully employed in burlesque. It is rib-tickling for prim Aunt Miranda to use the underworld idiom in low comedy, but it would be painful in serious drama.

Don't be pedantic. Never use your play as a soapbox. Have a message, by all means, but have it naturally and subtly. Don't let your protagonist break out of character and make a speech. The audience will quiver in embarrassed empathy and take refuge in laughter.

The plea for reform of social injustice and class tyranny has been voiced from Elizabeth's day to ours—and well voiced. The cry must be in keeping with the character who makes it and the provocation of the moment. In *Bury the Dead*, the command to rise against war comes from a poverty-created shrew, Martha Webster. It is not incongruous, but fitting and heartbreaking.

And in Paul Green's *Hymn to the Rising Sun* we see how competent exposition removes completely the need for sermons. Mr. Green's simple, tense dialogue is the vehicle for cutting satire of character and situation.

The action occurs in the hour before sunrise on the fourth day of July, in a chain-gang camp. One of the convicts, a newcomer, cannot work or sleep in his horror over the fate of the Runt, who has been imprisoned in the sweatbox for eleven days on bread and water rations, for masturbation. The climax of action and irony comes when the new prisoner, upon the captain's orders, turns his voice from the shrieks of the beating just administered to "harden him up" to the strains of *America*. The Runt is taken from the box, dead, and the report is made: "Dead of natural causes." The gang shuffles off to work while the impassive, elderly cook croaks *America*. That is all. There is no word of condemnation for the law that advocates such inhumanity. Rather, there is the captain's oration, given in his blunt, straightforward manner, explain-
ing the rigors of the chain gang. Yet the play is a most fierce indictment of this portion of the United States’ penal code.

You need not make a speech to make a protest.

Make clever language truly part of the play. Remember that your drama is not a vaudeville skit. “Gags” for their own sake ruin continuity. Only complete compatibility with the speaker can justify them, and they must fulfill some function besides “getting a laugh.” The Shakespeare of The Comedy of Errors has the Dromios speak mainly in very bad puns, adding nothing to the play. But in Othello he has learned to use wordplay as an integral part of the whole. “Put out the light, and then put out the light,” Othello says before the murder, thus suggesting both the events and his reaction to them.

A play of the 30’s called Kids Learn Fast is dotted with applied humor. Mr. Shifrin has certain things to say which he says in his own words, put into the mouths of babes. “The sheriff always comes the day after the lynching”; “Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, it makes no difference, it’s always the nigger what’s chased and everything.” These are not the natural language of the children he has sketched.

We have discussed so far the dialectics of dialogue in that it grows from character and conflict which must be dialectical to exist. But dialogue must also be dialectical in itself, in the small degree to which it can be divorced from its mates. It must work within itself on the principle of slowly rising conflict. When you name several things you save the most impressive for last. “The Mayor,” you say, “was there, and the Governor—and the President!” Even the voice recognizes growth: one, two, THREE, we say; not ONE, two, three. There is that classic reversal which warns against murder since it may lead to drinking, which in turn may lead to smoking, which may lead to nonobservance of the Sabbath, etc. This is good humor, but bad drama.

One of the finest examples of dialectical growth in dialogue
can be found in an otherwise poor play, *Idiot’s Delight* (Act II, Scene II).

**IRENE:** [*Talking to the munitions magnate*] . . . I have to run away from the terror of my own thoughts. So I amuse myself by studying the faces of the people I see. Just ordinary, casual, dull people. [*She is speaking in a tone that is sweetly sadistic.*] That young English couple, for instance. I was watching them during dinner, sitting there, close together, holding hands, and rubbing their knees together under the table. And I saw him in his nice, smart, British uniform, shooting a little pistol at a huge tank. And the tank rolls over him. And his fine, strong body, that was so full of the capacity for ecstasy, is a mass of mashed flesh and bones—a smear of purple blood—like a stepped-on snail. But before the moment of death he consoles himself by thinking, “Thank God she is safe! She is bearing the child I gave her, and he will live to see a better world.” . . . But I know where she is. She is lying in a cellar that has been wrecked by an air raid, and her firm young breasts are all mixed up with the bowels of a dismembered policeman, and the embryo from her womb is splattered against the face of a dead bishop. That is the kind of thought with which I amuse myself, Achille. And it makes me so proud to think that I am so close to you—who make all this possible.

Mr. Sherwood builds from “A tone that is sweetly sadistic” to a tragedy. He tops that by a hope quickly made more tragic by its irony. That irony is a description more terrible than the one before. And then the final peak of self-loathing, conscious degradation, conscious participation in the horror. No other arrangement could have been as effective. Anticlimax would have been inevitable and disastrous.

Just as conflict must come from character, and the sense of the speech from both, so must the sound of the speech come from all the others. The sentences must build up as the play builds up, conveying the rhythm and meaning of each scene by sound as well as sense. Here again, Shakespeare is our best
example. The sentences in his philosophical passages are weighty and measured; in his love scenes lines are lyrical and flow easily. Then, with the mounting of action, sentences become shorter and simpler, so that not only the sentence content, but the word and syllable content, vary with the development of the play.

The dialectical method does not rob the playwright of his creative privilege. Once your characters have been set in motion, their path and their speech are determined, to a great extent; but the choice of character is completely your own. Consider, therefore, the idiom your people will employ, and their voices, and methods of delivery. Think of their personalities, and backgrounds, and the influence of these on their speech. Orchestrate your characters, and their dialogue will take care of itself. When you laugh at The Bear, remember that Chekhov gained his bombast and ridiculous dignity from a bombastic character played against a ridiculously dignified one. And in Riders to the Sea, John Millington Synge sways us to the tragic yet lovely rhythm of people who employ harmonious rhythms which are not identical. Maurya, Nora, Cathleen, and Bartley all use the accent of the Aran Islanders. But Bartley is swaggering, Cathleen patient, Nora quick with youth, and Maurya slow with age. The combination is one of the most beautiful in English.

One thing more. Do not overemphasize dialogue. Remember that it is the medium of the play, but not greater than the whole. It must fit into the play without jarring. In the production of Iron Men, Norman Bel Geddes was criticized for his excellent set, showing the actual building of a skyscraper on the stage. It was too good a set for the play, and distracted any attention that might have been directed to the characters. Dialogue often does this, breaking away from the character and diverting attention to itself. Paradise Lost, for instance, disappointed many of Odets' admirers by its wordi-
ness. There are gratuitous speeches throughout, departures from the true idiom of the characters, inserted so that the dialogue might be accented. Both characters and dialogue suffered.

In summary, then: good dialogue is the product of characters carefully chosen and permitted to grow dialectically, until the slowly rising conflict has proved the premise.

4. Experimentation

**Question:** I don’t see how anyone can experiment, with the rigid rules you lay down. According to your warning, if an unfortunate playwright omits any one of the ingredients you say a play must contain, the consequences will be dire. Don’t you know that man makes rules just to break them—and that he often gets away with it?

**Answer:** Yes, we know. You can do almost anything with this approach—experiment to your heart’s content; just as a man can go under water, fly, live in the arctics or the tropics. But he cannot live without his heart or lungs, and you cannot write a good play without the basic ingredients. Shakespeare was one of the most daring experimenters of his day. To break any one of Aristotle’s three unities was a major crime, yet Shakespeare broke all three: the unities of time, place, and action. Every great writer, painter, musician, has broken some ironclad rule which was held sacred.

**Question:** You are strengthening my argument.

**Answer:** Then examine the work of these men. You’ll find character development through conflict. They broke all rules—save the fundamental ones. They built on character. A three-dimensional character is the foundation of all good plays. You’ll see perpetual transition in their work. And above all, you’ll find direction: a clear-cut premise. Further-
more, if you know what to look for, you’ll find sharp or-
chestration as well. They were dialectical, without know-
ing it.

There are no two men who talk alike, think alike, speak
alike. And there are no two men who write alike. You are
very wrong if you imagine that the dialectical approach
tries to force every man’s play into the same mold. On the
contrary, we ask you not to confuse originality with trick-
ery. Do not look for special effects, surprises, atmosphere,
mood, without knowing that all of them, and more, are in
the character. Experiment as you choose—but within the
laws of nature. Anything can be created within these laws.
It is interesting to know that stars are born as men are:
the attraction of opposites brings forth a nebulous form
of matter which will evolve if conditions are favorable.
Transition is prevalent there, too. Every nebula, every
star, every sun, is different, but their composition of ele-
ments is the same. Stars are as dependent upon each other
as humans. If their relationship were not fixed, they would
collide almost instantaneously, destroying each other. The
stars have vagabonds, too—comets, but they are controlled
by the same laws. Now, since everything is dependent upon
everything else, characters are also dependent upon each
other. They must have certain basic elements in common
—the three dimensions. Beyond that, you can experiment
as you choose. You can emphasize one trait above another;
you can enlarge details; you can deal with the subconscious;
you can try a variety of effects in form. You can do anything
conceivable, as long as you represent character.

QUESTION: How would you classify William Saroyan’s My
Heart’s in the Highlands?

ANSWER: As an experiment, of course.

QUESTION: Do you think it is a good play?

ANSWER: No. It is divorced from life. The characters live in
a vacuum.
QUESTION: Then you disapprove of it?

ANSWER: Emphatically no. Every experiment, no matter how bad the results, is worth the labor put into it in the long view. Nature, too, is experimenting constantly. If the experimental creation miscarries, it is done away with, but not before all the possibilities of improvement have been exhausted. If you know anything about natural history, you will have been struck by the way in which nature tries every conceivable method of expressing herself.

When Matisse, Gauguin, Picasso, experimented with painting, they did not throw away the basic principles of composition. Rather, they reaffirmed them. One emphasized color, another form, the third design, but each built on the rock bottom of composition, which is contradiction in lines and in color.

In a bad play, people live as if they were self-sufficient, alone in the world. A comet is not self-sufficient, nor is a vagabond, who must beg, steal, or borrow to live. Everything in nature and in society is dependent on other things, whether it be an actor, the sun, or an insect.

Here is an experiment that nature performed with a tree. As you know, a tree grows toward the sun, despite obstacles. But it happened, once, that an acorn dropped into a crevice of a perpendicular rock. The seed sprouted, became a sapling, and was normal except that it grew horizontally instead of toward the sun. The rocky bed gave it no chance to straighten out. After a while it managed to turn upward, having grown out from under its rocky roof, but it became top-heavy and seemed sure to crash. Then a miraculous thing happened. One of the top branches turned back toward the hillside, dug into another crevice, and secured a foothold. Another branch followed the first, and still another, until the tree was well supported. This so-called experiment by nature is no experiment at all, because it happened under the inescapable force of necessity. Necessity
makes characters do things they would never think of doing under normal circumstances.

Artists and writers experiment because they feel that it is necessary for them to do so if they are fully to express their characters. Their experimentation, even if we refuse to accept it, is good, because we learn from it.

We want to emphasize over and over again that nature is invariably dialectical in all her manifestations. Even that tree we spoke of before had a premise. There was orchestration between the tree and gravity. There was conflict between gravity and the tree’s will to live. There was transition in the growth of the tree, the action of the branches. There was crisis and climax, and resolution in the tree’s victory. What nature did with a tree a playwright can do with characters. He can experiment if he follows the fundamental principles of dialectics.

5. The Timeliness of a Play

QUESTION: I agree with most of the things you’ve told me about playwriting. But what about the selection of a timely subject? We may find a clean-cut, legitimate premise, which promises plenty of conflict, and yet have a manager turn it down because it is not timely.

ANSWER: The moment you start to worry about the opinion the managers will have of your play, you are lost. If you have a deep-rooted conviction, write it, regardless of what the public and the managers think. The moment you try to think with another man’s head, you might as well stop writing. If your play is good, the public will like it.

QUESTION: Isn’t it true that there are subjects which are timely while others are not?

ANSWER: Everything is timely if it is well written. Human values remain the same if they grow naturally out of the
forces around them. Human lives have always been precious, and always will be. A man of Aristotle’s day, portrayed honestly, and in his environment, can be as exciting as any man of today. We are given the chance to contrast his day with ours. We can see the progress which has been made since then, and guess the road ahead of us. Haven’t you ever seen an up-to-the-minute play which was as dull as two mothers reciting the virtues of their offspring? But *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, by Robert E. Sherwood, is important for today; *The Little Foxes*, by Lillian Hellman, which takes place in the early nineteen hundreds, is superior to the crop of that year for the simple reason that the characters have been given a chance to grow. *Family Portrait* concerns Jesus’ family and is not exactly spot news, but it is exciting. On the other hand, there is *The American Way* by Kaufman and Hart, and *No Time for Comedy*, by S. N. Behrman. Both deal with actual and burning issues of the day, yet neither is new nor alive. Plays which are valid and well written, like *A Doll’s House*, will reflect their time forever.

**QUESTION:** I still feel some topics are more timely than others. For instance, the plays of Noel Coward are about useless people who neither add to nor subtract from the main stream of progress. Is it worth while to write of such people?

**ANSWER:** Yes—but in better plays, of course. Coward hasn’t a single real character in his plays. If he had created tri-dimensional characters; if he had penetrated their backgrounds, their motivations, their relationship with society, their premises, their disappointments, the plays would have been worth seeing.

Although literature has been dealing with man for hundreds of years, we only began to understand character in the nineteenth century. Shakespeare, Molière, Lessing, even Ibsen, knew character instinctively rather than scientifically. Aristotle declared that character was second-
ary to action. Archer said that it must be in an author to penetrate character. Still other authorities admit that character is a mystery to them. It is pleasant to know that science provides a precedent for our disagreement with Aristotle and his interpreters. Millikan, one of the greatest American scientists, Nobel prize winner, stated a few years ago that the conversion of atomic energy to use was a pipe dream, never to be realized, because we are forced to use more energy in breaking down the atom than we can ever hope to get out of it. But then another Nobel prize winner, Arthur H. Compton, declared that actino-uranium, if completely converted into energy, would yield two hundred and thirty-five billion volts per atom. Actino-uranium breaks up into two gigantic atomic bullets of one hundred million volts each upon bombardment with a neutron carrying an energy of only about one fortieth of a volt, thus releasing eight billion times more energy than was originally put in. Character possesses limitless energy, too, but many playwrights have yet to learn how to release it and use it for their purposes. Wherever there is a man, whether it be in the past, present, or future, there can be an important play—provided the character is portrayed in all its three dimensions.

**QUESTION:** Then there is no difference what era I tackle, if I realize tridimensional characters?

**ANSWER:** When you say tridimensional, we hope you understand that environment is included, and that that means a thorough knowledge, on your part, of the customs, morals, philosophy, art, and language of that time. If you write, for instance, of the fifth century B.C., you must know that era as you are supposed to know your own. Personally, we suggest that you stay here, in the twentieth century, perhaps in your own town or city, and write about people whom you know. Your task will be much easier. The
timeliness of your play will be timeless if you realize your characters in their physical, sociological, and psychological dimensions.

6. Entrances and Exits

QUESTION: I have a friend, a playwright, who has a great deal of difficulty with entrances and exits. Can you give a few pointers on this?

ANSWER: Tell him to integrate his characters more thoroughly than he has done.

QUESTION: How do you know he didn’t integrate them?

ANSWER: When you find the floor near the windows wet after a rainstorm, it is logical to suppose that the windows were open during the downpour. Trouble with entrances and exits indicates that the playwright doesn’t know his characters well enough. When the curtain rises in Ghosts, we find Engstrand and his daughter, who serves at the Alving house, on the stage. Almost at once she warns him not to talk loud enough to wake Oswald, who has arrived home from Paris tired. Besides, she feels that it is not Engstrand’s business how long Oswald sleeps, when the old man comments. He suggests, slyly, that she may have designs on Oswald. Regina is furious, indicating the truth of the thrust. This conversation, besides its other virtues, prepares us for Oswald’s entrance later. We learn from Engstrand that Manders is in the city, and from Regina that he is expected at any moment. Manders’ entrance is well grounded, but it is not a device. There is every reason, in the play, for Manders’ appearance at this time. Regina pushes Engstrand out, and Manders enters. She has much to say to him—none of it idle chatter. The talk is deeply integrated and grows from the previous scene. Manders
is forced to call Mrs. Alving, in order to escape from Regina's insinuations. In the pause before she enters he picks up a book—a gesture which motivates an important scene to come. Mrs. Alving enters, in answer to Manders' call. We have had two entrances and two exits thus far, each a necessary part of the play. Before Oswald actually enters, there is much more talk of him, so that we look forward to his entrance.

QUESTION: I see the point. But not everyone is an Ibsen. We write differently today. The tempo of our plays is more swift. We have no time for such elaborate preparation.

ANSWER: In Ibsen's time there were almost as many playwrights as there are today. How many of them can you name? What happened to the others, who wrote popular but bad plays? They've been forgotten, as will all those who think as you do. Yes, times have changed, customs have changed, but man still has a heart and lungs. Your tempo may change, should change, but motivation must remain. The cause and the effect may be different from the cause and effect of a century ago, but they must be present, clearly and logically. Environment, for instance, was a vital influence. It still is. It was bad to send a character out of the room for a glass of water merely so that two other characters could talk privately and then have him return when they finish their chat. It is still inex- cusable.

People can't wander in and out without rhyme or reason, as they did in Idiot's Delight. Entrances and exits are as much a part of a play's framework as are windows and doors in a house. When someone comes in or goes out he must do so of necessity. His action must help the development of the conflict and be part of the character in the process of revealing himself.
7. Why Are Some Bad Plays Successful?

Would-be playwrights often wonder whether it pays to study, to go out of their way to write a good play, when plays which aren’t worth the paper they’re written on make millions. What is behind these “successes”?

Let’s look at one of these phenomenal successes: Abie’s Irish Rose. The play, despite its obvious shortcomings, had a premise, conflict, and orchestration. The author dealt with people whom the audience knew very well from life and from vaudeville. The weak characterization was balanced by this knowledge. The audience thought the characters were real, although they were only familiar. Then, too, the audience was familiar with the religious problem involved and felt the superiority which comes from being “in the know.” This was intensified by the climax. The audience was fascinated by the problem of which religion would claim the child. They took sides, mentally. When the climax—and the twins—came, both sides were satisfied. Everyone was happy: parents, grandparents, audience. We think the play succeeded because the audience took an active part in making the characters live.

Tobacco Road is a different case entirely. No doubt Tobacco Road is a very bad play—but it has characters. We not only see them—we smell them. Their sexual depravity, their animal existence, capture the imagination. The audience looks at them as it would at the man in the moon, if he were displayed on the stage. The most poverty-stricken New York audience feels that its fate is incomparably better than that of the Lesters. Here again is the feeling of superiority. The emphasis on the distortion of the characters obscures the vital issue: social readjustment. The play has characters, but no growth, which is why it is static, making its chief purpose the exposition of these brutal, demoralized creatures. The
audience, mesmerized, flocked to see these animals who somehow resembled human beings.

Noel Coward's extraordinary success arises from the fact that his horrors are much more pleasant: who will sleep with whom? Will he get her, will she get him? Remember that Coward came after the World War, with his wealthy English sophisticates, oh so eager to get everything they could from life. A war-weary audience, surfeited with blood and death, gobbled up his farces. The lines seemed witty because they helped the audience to forget the battering the world had taken. Coward, and many like him, came and lulled the shocked audience into numbed relaxation. His reception today would be tepid.

Kaufman and Hart's You Can't Take It with You wasn't a bad play; it wasn't a play at all. It was a cleverly constructed vaudeville piece, with a premise. The characters were amusing caricatures, no one of them related to the other. Each had his own hobbies, needs, peculiarities. The authors had a task in fitting them all into one scheme. It succeeded because it presented a moral lesson which everyone could approve without following; and it made the audience laugh, which was its purpose.

Do not forget that most plays which become successful are not terrible. Plays like Sherwood's Abe Lincoln in Illinois, Kingsley's Dead End, Housman's Victoria Regina, Bein's Let Freedom Ring, Carroll's Shadow and Substance, and Lillian Hellman's Watch on the Rhine merit serious consideration, despite their obvious shortcomings. And they are based on character. The really bad plays had something strange about them, something outlandish which put them over despite their flaws. Tridimensional characters would have made them even more successful.

If you are interested not in writing good plays, but in making money quickly, there's no hope for you. Not only won't you write a good play; you won't make any money.
We've seen hundreds of young playwrights work feverishly at half-digested plays, under the impression that producers were waiting in line to snatch them away. And we've seen them disheartened when their manuscripts finished the rounds. Even in business, those men go ahead who give the customer more than he expected. If a play is written for the sole purpose of making money, it will lack sincerity. Sincerity cannot be manufactured, cannot be injected into a play when you do not feel it.

We suggest that you write something you really believe in. And, for heaven's sake, don't hurry. Play with your manuscript, enjoy yourself. Watch your characters grow. Draw characters who live in society, whose actions are forced by necessity, and you will find that you've bettered your chances of selling the play. Don't write for the producers or for the public. Write for yourself.

8. Melodrama

Now for a word about the difference between drama and melodrama. In a melodrama the transition is faulty or entirely lacking. Conflict is overemphasized. The characters move with lightning speed from one emotional peak to another—the result of their one-dimensionality. The ruthless killer, pursued by the police, suddenly stops to help a blind man cross the street. This is phony on the surface. It is unlikely that a man running for his life would even see the blind man, let alone help him. And, certainly, a ruthless killer would be more likely to shoot the blind man for getting in his way than to make kindly gestures toward him. Transition must be present to make even a three-dimensional character believable. The lack of transition produces melodrama.
9. On Genius

Let us examine the definition of genius:

Genius is a transcendent capacity for taking trouble first of all.
—Frederick the Great by Thomas Carlyle

We agree.

From a maximum of observations the talented man draws a minimum of conclusions, whereas the genius draws a maximum of conclusions from a minimum of observations.
—General Types of Superior Men by Osias L. Schwarz

We still agree.

Genius is the happy result of a combination of many circumstances.
—The Study of British Genius by Havelock Ellis

We shall come back to this later.

Genius: the mental endowment peculiar to an individual; that disposition or aptitude of mind which qualifies a person for a certain kind of action or special success in a given pursuit; extraordinary mental superiority; unusual power of invention or origination of any kind.
—Webster's International Dictionary.

The "genius" can learn more rapidly than the average man. He is inventive, he does things which do not occur to the ordinary person. He is mentally superior. But none of this means that a "genius" can be truly a genius without serious study. We have seen mediocre men outstrip geniuses who were too lazy to learn and to work. Call these latter "half-talented," the fact remains that the world is littered with them. Why do these mental giants remain obscure? Why do so many of them die in misery? Look at their background, at their physiology, and you will see the answer.
Many never have the chance to go to school (poverty). Others fall in with bad company and their extraordinary talent is wasted on useless or evil ventures (environment). There are others who study, but have a false picture of the subject under consideration (education). You may claim that a real genius always finds a way to succeed, but that is not so. Every man who has succeeded, despite adversity, has been given the chance to do so.

The extraordinary mental power of a genius is not necessarily strong enough to create his success. First, one must have a start, an opportunity to deepen one’s knowledge in a chosen profession. A genius has the ability to work at something longer and with more patience than any other man.

The implication here is that geniuses are not rare. Webster’s says that genius is the “disposition or aptitude of mind which qualifies a person for a certain kind of action.” This “certain kind of action” is denied to many who have the aptitude. What is this type of man supposed to do if he is forced by circumstance to engage in action which is exactly opposite to the “certain kind” for which he is qualified? In this case the word “certain” possesses the utmost importance. A genius is a genius in only one thing, “a certain kind of action.” There are exceptions, of course: Leonardo da Vinci, Goethe—perhaps a dozen rare men in the history of mankind who excelled in more than one field. But we are speaking of the others: men like Shakespeare, Darwin, Socrates, Jesus—each a genius in one field. Shakespeare had the good fortune to be connected with the theater, though that connection was lowly at first. Darwin came from a well-to-do family which considered him a failure despite his college degree. And then he was taken on an expedition to the tropics, and the mind which was “qualified for a certain kind of action” had a chance to display its aptitude. And so with the others.

No one is born to be great. We love one certain subject
more than any other. Given all we need to further our knowledge, we are likely to make great strides; forced to do something else, we become disgruntled, discouraged, and end in failure.

We call an apple tree an apple tree before it bears fruit. But isn’t it different with genius? May it not be said that a genius is a man who has accomplished something, and not a man who has almost accomplished something, or who wanted to accomplish something and has been thwarted in some way?

Not if the quotations above make sense. Not one speaks of accomplishment. They merely try to analyze the material of which genius is made. Success is a happy combination of circumstances which help a genius to expand, to produce the thing for which he has infinite capacity. That is the meaning of the quotation from Havelock Ellis. Nor is there anything wrong with Osias L. Schwarz’ observation that “a genius draws a maximum of conclusions from a minimum of observations.” But does this hold true only if the genius happens to succeed? Does an apple seed cease to be an apple seed if it is carried to the heart of the city and deposited on hard asphalt, to be crushed by heavy wheels? No, it remains an apple seed anywhere, although it is denied the chance to fulfill its destiny.

A fish lays millions of eggs, of which only one in a thousand live. Out of those hatched, only a few reach maturity. Yet every single egg was a bona fide fish egg, having all the attributes necessary for the development of a fish. They were eaten by other fishes, and those eggs which survived owe nothing to their clever insight. Ellis is right: “Genius is the happy result of a combination of many circumstances.” Survival is one of these, inheritance another. Freedom from poverty is a third, although many of the known geniuses which mankind has produced came from the lower reaches of society, fighting every inch of the way toward the sun. Poverty could
not keep down these few but it does keep down thousands of others who would have succeeded had “the happy result of a combination of many circumstances” favored them.

As for all the braggarts who run around, beating their collective chests and claiming to be geniuses, we cannot dismiss them out of hand. They are offensive, but some of them may be the genuine article.

It is said that all murderers claim innocence, insist that they were railroaded. Criminal history teaches us that some of them really were innocent, despite the derisive laughter of those who “knew better.”

Yet we must not forget one important attribute of the genius: an infinite capacity for taking pains in the field where his interest lies. The majority of braggarts spend too much time boasting to have much left for painstaking work.

We cannot emphasize too strongly the fact that, although geniuses are equipped with uncommon powers of mental absorption in their particular field, many of them are never given the chance to approach the thing in which they are interested. Remember that most geniuses are one-sided, and you will see that in an alien atmosphere they have no chance to develop.

A fish out of water is a dead fish, and a genius kept from his art is often a simpleton.

io. *What Is Art?—A Dialogue*

**QUESTION:** Would you say that one individual embodies within himself good and bad, noble and depraved thoughts? Is it in every character to be a martyr or a betrayer?

**ANSWER:** Yes. A man not only represents himself and his race, but mankind. His physical development is, on a small scale, the same as that of mankind as a whole. Starting in his mother’s womb, he goes through all the metamorphoses
man underwent from the time he started his long journey from the protoplasm. And the same laws apply to man and to nations. Man fumbles through mist, over unchartered roads, as the tribes, groups, and races once did. In his childhood, in his adolescence, in his manhood, he experiences the same tribulations, the same battle for happiness that nations experience. One man is the replica of all. His weakness is our weakness, his greatness our greatness.

**QUESTION:** Must I be my brother’s keeper? I don’t want to be responsible for his actions. I am an individual.

**ANSWER:** So is a cat, or a rat, or a lion, or an insect. Take termites. They have females who do nothing but lay eggs. They have workers, guards, soldiers, and other individuals whose sole function is to be stomach for the community. They chew the fibrous raw food, digest it, and only then is it fit to eat. All the members of this insect society flock to this individual, this living stomach, and suck the prepared food to sustain life. Each has a specific function, each is indispensable. Destroy any branch of this well-organized society and all of it will perish. Separately, they cannot live, any more than a nerve, a lung, or a liver can live without the rest of the body. Put together, these individual insects make an individual—society. It is the same with your body. Every part functions separately; co-ordinated all these separate parts make one man. And a man, too, is only part of the whole: mankind. Every individual in a termite family has its own personality, just as every leg, arm, or lung has its own characteristics, but it is still only part of the whole. It is for this reason that you had best be your brother’s keeper; he and you are parts of the same whole, and his misfortune necessarily affects you.

**QUESTION:** If one man is the possessor of all the attributes of mankind, what chance have I of depicting him in totality?

**ANSWER:** It isn’t an easy task, by any means, but your charac-
ter drawing is good only to the extent that you approach this "totality." Only by aiming for perfection in art can you succeed, even if you never reach your goal.

**QUESTION:** What is art, anyway?

**ANSWER:** Art is, in a microscopic form, the perfection not only of mankind but of the universe.

**QUESTION:** Universe? Aren't you going a little bit too far?

**ANSWER:** The protozoan is composed of the same elements as the human body cells. The conglomeration of millions of these cells, the body, contains the same elements as each individual cell. Each cell has its specific function in the society of cells which is the body, just as each man has his function in the society of men which is the world. And just as the cell represents the man, and the man the society, so does the society represent the universe. The universe is governed by the same general laws that govern human society. The compound, the mechanism, the action and reaction are the same.

When a dramatist creates one perfect human being he reproduces not only the man but the society to which he belongs, and that society is only an atom of the universe. So the art which created the man reflects the universe.

**QUESTION:** The "perfection" you speak of might become a slavish imitation of nature, or an enumeration of the contents of a human being.

**ANSWER:** Are you afraid of knowledge? Does it hurt an engineer to know the science of mathematics, the law of gravity, the tension of the material with which he is working? He must know everything that pertains to his profession, before we can ask whether he possesses the talent to produce a bridge which will be a joy to look at, as well as a useful construction. His knowledge of the exact sciences does not exclude imagination, taste, grace in actual execution. The same holds true of playwrights. Some men may obey all the laws of technique, yet their work is lifeless. Others—
and there have been such men—utilize all the available
data, obey the rules which they find valid, and fuse this
information with their emotions. They lift their knowledge
on the wings of their imagination, and create a masterwork.

11. When You Write a Play

Be sure to formulate a premise.
Your next step will be to choose the pivotal character,
who will force the conflict. If your premise happens to be
"Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its love," the man
or the woman who will be jealous should be inherent in
your premise. The pivotal character must be a person who
will go all the way to avenge his injury, whether it be real
or imaginary.

The next step will be to line up the other characters. But
these characters have to be orchestrated.
The unity of opposites must be binding.
Be careful to select the correct point of attack. It must be
the turning point in the life of one or more of your characters.

Every point of attack starts with conflict. But don't forget
that there are four kinds of conflict: static, jumping, fore-
shadowing and slowly rising. You want only rising and fore-
shadowing conflict.

No conflict can rise without perpetual exposition, which is
transition.
Rising conflict, the product of exposition and transition,
will ensure growth.

Characters who are in conflict will go from one pole to
another—like hate to love—which will create crisis.
If growth continues in a steady rise, climax will follow
crisis.
The aftermath of climax is the conclusion.
Be sure that the unity of opposites is so strong that the
characters will not weaken or quit the play in the middle. Every character has to have something at stake, as, for example, property, health, future, honor, life. The stronger the unity of opposites, the more certain you can be that your characters will prove your premise.

*Dialogue* is as important as any other part of a play. Every word uttered should stem from the characters involved.

Brander Matthews and his pupil, Clayton Hamilton (in his *The Theory of the Theatre*), insist that a play can be judged only in a theater, before an audience.

Why? We grant that it is easier to see life in a flesh-and-blood actor than on a printed page, but why should that be the *only* way of recognizing it? What a waste of material there would be if builders used the same method of judgment. Houses would be built in actual size and material before the prospective owners decided whether or not they wanted that kind of house at all; bridges would span rivers before the government could tell the engineer whether or not his bridge was acceptable.

A play can be judged before it reaches actual production. First, the premise must be discernible from the beginning. We have a right to know in what direction the author is leading us. The characters, growing out of the premise, necessarily identify themselves with the aim of the play. They will prove the premise through conflict. The play must start with conflict, which rises steadily until it reaches the climax. The characters must be so well drawn that, whether or not the author has declared their individual backgrounds, we can make out accurate case histories for each of them.

If we know the composition of character and conflict, we should know what to expect from any play we read.

Between attack and counterattack, between conflict and conflict, is transition, holding them together as mortar holds bricks. We will look for transition as we look for characters,
and if we do not find it we will know why the play progresses by leaps and bounds, instead of growing naturally. And if we find too much exposition, we know that the play will be static.

If we read a play in which the author discusses his characters in minute detail without starting his conflict, we know he is ignorant of the ABC of dramatic technique. When the characters are obscure, the dialogue rambling and confused, we need no production to determine whether the play is good or bad. It must be bad.

A play should start at a turning point in the life of one of the characters. We can see, after the first few pages, whether or not this is the case in the play. Similarly, we can learn, in our first few minutes of reading, whether or not the characters are orchestrated. No production is necessary to tell us these things.

The dialogue must stem from the character, not the author. It must indicate the character’s background, personality, and occupation.

If we read a play which is cluttered up with people who do nothing to further the ultimate aim, who are there simply for comic relief or variety, we know that the play is fundamentally bad.

To say that we must have a production to judge a play is, to say the least, begging the question. It shows an ignorance of the fundamentals of playwriting and the need of an outside stimulus to make a vital decision.

True, many a good play has been ruined by bad casting or an inadequate production. By the same token, many a good actor has been thrown out of gear by a bad play. Give Fritz Kreisler, the great fiddler, a Woolworth violin to play on and see what happens to his artistry. Reverse this and give a person who is ignorant of music, a Stradivarius. The results will be disastrous.

We are not unaware of the answers we may expect. “Art,” certain men have said—and will say—“is not an exact science,
such as bridge building or architecture. Art is governed by moods, emotions, personal approach. It is subjective. You cannot tell a creator what formula to use when he is inspired. He uses what his spark of inspiration points out. There is no set rule."

Every man writes as he pleases, of course, but there are certain rules he must follow. He is forced, for instance, to use a writing instrument and something on which to write. These may be ancient or modern, but you cannot do without them. There are rules of grammar, and even those writers who employ the stream-of-consciousness technique are observing certain rules of construction. As a matter of fact, a writer like James Joyce sets up rules far more rigid than the average writer is able to follow. So, in playwriting, there is no conflict between personal approach and basic rules. If you know the principles, you will be a better craftsman and artist.

It wasn’t a simple task to learn the alphabet. Do you remember when a "B" looked dangerously like a "D," the "W" like a drunken "M"? It was difficult to make sense of what you read when you were so occupied in watching the letters themselves. Did you imagine there would be a time when you could write without stopping to think that there was such a thing as "A" or "W"?

12. How to Get Ideas

Whenever you have a fully rounded character who wants something very badly, you have a play. You don’t need to think about situations. This militant character creates his own situations.

On page 130 of this book is a list of abstract nouns. Read it.

You must first remember that art is not the mirror of life,
but the essence of life. When you take a basic emotion, you might as well emphasize that emotion or trait.

If you write about love, you should write about great love. If you write about ambition, it should be ruthless ambition. If you choose affection, it should be possessive affection. They generate conflict.

Let us take the simple noun “affection.” Affection was the motivating emotion in The Silver Cord. This is not an ordinary affection or love. It is a selfish, over-possessive love of a mother for her sons.

It is not enough, of course, to know that a person is possessive; you must know why. Generally, insecurity and the desire to be important are the fundamental reasons for all exaggerated traits. The mother wanted to be the center of interest, instead of permitting the women her sons brought home to have their natural importance.

Affection is a basic human need, but affection, overdone, can be crushing. If you wish to escape from excessive affection, you find it almost impossible. After all, what can you do about a person who loves you? If you are a decent fellow you are bound hand and foot to the one who loves you, although you may wish to be a million miles away.

Drama must not only entertain but teach as well. The dramatist interprets man to man. When you see a character on the stage causing unhappiness, you might recognize yourself in the same act.

Let us go back to page 130 and take the word abusive.

Abusive: An abusive character suggests one who doesn’t realize his own shortcomings. He is shortsighted, narrow-minded, lacks imagination. He tries to do the right thing but can’t. He doesn’t know how. This man will inevitably force you into conflict.
Accuracy: Can you imagine living with a man who is accurate twenty-four hours a day? Such a person must be abhorrent; his perfection demands perfection from everyone else. You must note that it is impossible for a human being to be one hundred per cent perfect, but of course the perfectionist is not aware that he is an ordinary human being too, who also has faults and weaknesses. And so, such an individual must create conflict with the people around him.

Conceit: A conceited person (not one with the ordinary amount of vanity, but an ego-maniac) must necessarily be hypersensitive. He is quick to take offense at any real or imaginary criticism. He is so terribly insecure that he must bloat his own ego constantly to reassure himself of his own importance. Such a person must always have things done his own way, and it takes adroit handling and diplomacy on the part of others to accomplish anything with him. Such a person must inevitably lose the love, affection, and respect of those around him—and therein lies your play.

Dignity: An overdignified person (remember we must exaggerate this trait) should be good material for a comedy. Your character would be pompous, a stuffed shirt, mortally afraid of stepping out of line the least bit. Put him in conflict with a person who is just his opposite, make sure to create a unity of opposites between them so that they cannot separate, and you have a hilarious play.

Wisdom: Too much of anything, even a good thing, can be very irritating. Your wise person who is always right, who never makes a mistake, can make the ordinary mortals around him feel very stupid and unimportant. Even though they admire and respect him, the fact that he makes them feel inferior instead of making them love him, which he desires most, makes them rebellious, resentful, and angry.
There are people who start things and never finish them. There are the eternal procrastinators, who will always do the thing tomorrow. There are the impulsive, who act first and think later. There are, in fact, thousands of human traits, emotions, qualities which can create characters for a play, a novel, or a story.

You can take an honest-to-goodness person, a real individual, but with one of these traits exaggerated. You will have so many characters for plays or novels that it would take more than a lifetime to write half of them.

Every word on page 130 represents a character. Let us see again: Clumsy: You needn't take a stock character, a "dolt." Take a woman who is beautiful and clever, but clumsy.

Anybody who overdoes something is good material for a story. Remember: Your characters must be militant. A militant person is bound to expose himself through conflict. The secret of happiness is the understanding that no one is perfect; we must always realize that there is room for improvement for all of us.

You must feel your story deeply—in fact, it should be a conviction of yours. You must never be afraid of conflict in your writing, because if you do, you will have a dull and static piece of work in whatever form you happen to use.

Even a good idea at best is only an idea. What is an idea anyway? A seed. Nothing more, nothing less. It's up to you to do something with it. Any idea without three-dimensional characters isn't worth a plugged nickel.

Allegory or any imaginative conceptions are good only if they represent human aspirations.

To get an idea for any type of writing is the easiest thing. Look around you and be observant. Be observant and you will be forced to admit that the world is an inexhaustible pastry shop and you are permitted to choose from the delicacies the tastiest bits for yourself.

Here are a few characters you might try your strength on. I
tried to find out what goes into a character. The following are types. You should make living people out of them.

*What Makes a Ruthless Character?*

(A ruthless character is not necessarily bad.)

Something vital at stake
Can't turn back
Determination
Ambition
Desperation
Cornered—trapped
Fear of failure
Truthfulness (Militant)
Great Passion (Love, Hate, Greediness, Jealousy, etc.)
Fixation on goal
Self-centeredness
One-track mind
Farsightedness
Revengefulness
Opportunism
Greediness
Vindictiveness

This is a composite of many ruthless characters. Pick your own.

*A Shiftless Man suggests:*

Day-dreaming
Lack of initiative
Laziness
One who has no objective in life
Devil-may-care

*A Clever Man suggests:*

Shrewdness
Quick-wittedness
Persuasiveness
Observation
Intellect
Talent
A good psychologist

*A Bored Person suggests:*

Slow-wittedness
Egotist
Self-centeredness
Worry or fear
Lacking in insight, observation or intelligence
Blasé

*Ill-Temper suggests:*

Inconsiderate
Irascible
Nervous
Lacking in understanding
Impatient
Frustrated
Hating
Sick
Self-willed
Spoiled
Quick-witted

*Anti-Social suggests:*

Cruel
Rapacious
Inhibited
Inhuman
Ruthless
Anything which hurts mankind
Bigoted
Perverse
Love of Luxury suggests:

Self-indulgent
Sensuousness
Self-expression
Great hunger for beauty
Decadence
Over-indulgence

Self-Righteousness suggests:

Hypercritical
Bigoted
Fearful
Insecure
Inferiority complex
Domineering
Egotistical
Selfishness
Gossipy
Fighter

Mistrustfulness suggests:

Insecurity
Guilt complex
Skepticism
Sneakiness
Vanity
Cowardly
Unhappy
No power of evaluation
Inferiority complex

Bigotry suggests:

Narrow, judging others according to a single set of standards
Conformist, righteous, unimaginative
Cold anger
Propriety
Inflexibility
Reactionary
Formal
Courteous
Polite
Zealot (A zealot is bigoted, but a bigot is not necessarily a zealot yet.)
Guilt complex

A Cad suggests:
Egotist
Unscrupulous
Selfishness
Envy
Insecurity
Vanity
Fickle
Loneliness
Inferiority complex
Lacks ability to do something creative

Ambition suggests:
Rebellion against the status quo
Desire for recognition
Desire to justify existence
Dissatisfaction
Craving for change
Craving for fame
Escape from frustration
Craving for power
Jealousy
Control
Desire to entertain
Self-fulfillment
Ruthlessness
Desire to be secure

You can go on from here, finding new, exciting ideas ad infinitum, with only old age or lack of imagination to stop you.

**QUESTION:** I suppose all these examples will help me get ideas, but . . . I don’t understand why people, characters, must be the epitome of their type. People in real life are not necessarily mad, or as extreme as the characters you say we should look for. Following your suggestions, I am afraid, our stories or plays will be more exaggerated than normal.

**ANSWER:** Were you ever so angry that people thought you were losing your mind? No? Other people were. Were you ever so jealous that you thought you couldn’t bear it any longer? If your answer happens to be “no,” you are a rare one, and you’ll never understand the motivation of a mere human.

There are times when the most normal people feel that the most dreadful revenge is an absolute necessity. A writer is supposed to catch people in crises. Unfortunately, in a crisis, no one behaves normally. If you ever went through a cataclysm, you will understand not only the mental state of your characters in crises, but the motivation, the tortuous road your people wandered down to their sad or triumphant destination.

When we read in a story or see on the stage, cruelty, violence, abuse, and all the passion that will transform men into beasts, we really see ourselves as we were, perhaps only for moments, sometime in our lives.

No doubt about it, there were ruthless characters throughout history, and they were the ones who influenced, for better or for worse, the destiny of man.

Let me emphasize it once more—it is worth your while to
write about people only when they have arrived at a turning point in their lives. Their example will become a warning or an inspiration for us.

13. Writing for Television

Anyone who knows how to write a good one-act play need not fear that he must have additional talent to write for that new and exciting medium, television.

They tell you that from the moment a play starts on the television screen, the story must have the power to hold the audience spellbound to the very end. This is nothing new to a good playwright. We dealt with this very principle under “Point of Attack.” How to generate interest and conflict in television is exactly the same as in a good play. The principle is no different: suspense, the foreshadowing of conflict, should hover over everything from the very beginning.

There is a difference between a one-act play and a half-hour-long play for television in that while the one-acter will usually use only one set, a television show uses three or four and they can be alternated as often as the play requires.

Television producers prefer as few characters as possible.

The author of a television play need not worry about camera angles or any other technical peculiarities of a production. His script should not indicate camera directions. To allow for the insertion of these directions later, however, his script should be typed on only one half of the page—one side. A television script usually runs from forty to fifty half-pages. The instructions are all typed in capitals.

Here is the beginning of a television show written by two of my students and produced on “Danger” (CBS). It will give you an idea of the way to present your script.
THE ANNIVERSARY
A Play for Television

by

EVELYN CORNELL

and

JOHN T. CHAPMAN

CHARACTERS:

Katharine McCloud
Alan McCloud
Charlie Dean
Mrs. Bryce
Josef Kucharski
The Prosecuting Attorney
The Judge
A Delivery Boy

SCENE:

The McClouds’ renovated farmhouse in Connecticut. The front door has a heavy glass panel and opens into a wide central hallway which has double doors leading at the left into a dining room and other doors at the right leading into the living room. Stairs in the hall lead to the second floor. A door to the kitchen is in the dining room. The bedroom and the courtroom may be small insets.

It is an early spring day.

[Mrs. Bryce enters dining room from kitchen, carrying coffee service which she takes to sideboard. She is fortyish, typically rural New England. At a sound in hall she turns to double doors as Alan McCloud enters, tossing hat, topcoat and briefcase onto chair. He is about 35, thin and harassed—looking decidedly irritable at the moment.]
MRS. BRYCE: Good morning, Mr. McCloud.
ALAN: Morning, Mrs. Bryce. Is coffee ready?
MRS. BRYCE: Yes, sir. Will you be having eggs?
ALAN: [sits at table] I'm afraid there isn't time, Mrs. Bryce. I
have to take the early train into town. Court opens this
morning and the case I have been working on is first on
the docket . . . [She pours coffee, he puts his face into his
hands, straightens as she brings cup.] Let's see . . . Thurs-
day . . . I wonder if you'd mind not taking your after-
noon off today? [She looks at him, prepared to object.] Mrs.
McCloud is . . . she hasn't been very well and has been
having trouble sleeping . . .

GLOSSARY OF TV TERMS

B.C.U.: Abbreviation for Big Close-up.
BRIDGE: A connecting link between one scene or action and
another. Most usually a term in nondramatic writing; the
term "transition" is used in dramatic writing.
CLOSE-UP: Camera concentration on an object or a person.
With a person the frame would be entirely filled by the
head and shoulders.
COLD: Music, sound, or voices heard alone or in clear.
CROSS-FADE: To fade out one picture and to fade in another.
Audio—to fade out one sound and to fade in another.
CUT: To stop an action, cameras, etc.
CUT TO: To switch from one camera to another—hence, one
picture to another.
DISSOLVE: To fade out one picture as another picture simulta-
neously is faded in.
DISSOLVE IN: To fade in a new picture.
DISSOLVE OUT: To fade out a picture.
DIRECT CUT: An abrupt visual transition from the image of
one camera to the image of another.
DOLLY TO: Motion by a camera as it moves toward or away from an object.
DOLLY IN: To move the camera toward an object or person.
DOLLY OUT: To move the camera back from an object.
FADE-IN: Video—a picture gradually appears on a dark screen. Audio—to bring up, gradually, the volume of a voice, a sound, or music.
FADE-OUT: Video—a picture gradually fades from full brightness until the screen is dark. Audio—to diminish the volume of a sound until it is no longer audible.
FILM CLIP: Film inserted into a live telecast.
FRAME: What the camera sees from a fixed position.
FULL BACK: To dolly out from a close-up.
LONG SHOT: A shot which includes the foreground as well as the background.
IN: Music comes in.
IN CLEAR: The same as cold.
OVER FRAME: The speaker or the source of the sound is not visible in the frame of the picture.
PANNING: To begin a shot at one position and to move to another position without a break.
SNEAK: To bring in music, sound, or voices at an extremely low level of volume.
SUSTAIN: Keep the music going.
UNDER: Music goes on under dialogue or narration.
BACK WITH MUSIC: Words spoken over musical background.
DOWN: The volume of the music is lowered.
MUSIC IN B.G.: Music in the background.
OVER MUSIC: Words spoken over musical background.
OUT: The music stops.
STING: To punctuate with a sudden musical phrase or chord.
UP: The volume of the music is raised.
14. Conclusion

If you cannot differentiate between fragrances, you cannot be a perfume maker; if you have no legs, you cannot be a runner. If you are tone-deaf, you cannot be a musician.

To become a playwright you should be a man with imagination and common sense, to begin with. You must be observant. You must never be satisfied with superficial knowledge. You must have patience to search for causes. You must have a sense of balance and good taste. You should know economy, psychology, physiology, sociology. You can learn these things with patience and hard work—and if you do not learn them, no approach will make a good playwright of you. We are often astonished at how glibly people decide to be writers or playwrights. It takes about three years of apprenticeship to make a good shoemaker; the same is true of carpentry or any other skill. Why should playwriting—one of the hardest professions in the world—be acquired overnight, without serious study? The dialectical approach will help those who have prepared for this work. It will also help the beginner by giving him a clear picture of the obstacles in his path and of the road he must travel if he is to achieve his ambitions.