

Notes from
John Howard Lawson's
**Theory and Technique of
Playwriting and Screenwriting** (1949)

The Law of Conflict

Since the drama deals with social relationships, a dramatic conflict must be a *social* conflict. We can imagine a dramatic struggle between man and other men, or between man and his environment, including social forces or forces of nature. But it is difficult to imagine a play in which forces of nature are pitted against other forces of nature... Dramatic conflict is also predicated on the exercise of conscious will... The essential character of drama is social conflict in which the conscious will is exerted: persons are pitted against other persons, or individuals against groups, or groups against other groups, or individuals or groups against social or natural forces.

[T]he intensity and meaning of the conflict lies in the disparity between the aim and the result, between the purpose and the achievement.

When human beings are involved in events which lead to a crisis, they do not stand idly by and watch the climax approach. Human beings seek to shape events for their own advantage, to extricate themselves from difficulties which are partially foreseen. The activity of the conscious will, seeking a way out, creates the very conditions which precipitate the crisis.

The meaning of the situations lies in the degree and kind of conscious will exerted, and in how it works; the crisis, the dramatic explosion, is created by *the gap between the aim and the result* – that is, by a shift of equilibrium between the force of will and the force of social necessity. A crisis is the point at which the balance of forces is so strained that something cracks, thus causing a realignment of forces, a new pattern of relationships.

The will which creates drama is directed toward a specific goal. But the goal which it selects must be sufficiently *realistic* to enable the will to have some effect on reality. We in the audience must be able to understand the goal and the possibility of its fulfillment. The kind of will exerted must spring from a consciousness of reality which corresponds to our own.

[W]e are concerned not only with the *consciousness* of will, but with the *strength* of will. The exercise of will must be sufficiently vigorous to sustain and develop the conflict to a point of issue. A conflict which fails to reach a crisis is a conflict of weak wills.

Drama cannot deal with people whose wills are atrophied, who are unable to make decisions which have even temporary meaning, who adopt no conscious attitude toward events, who make no effort to control their environment. The precise degree of strength of will required is the strength needed to bring the action to an issue, to create a change of equilibrium between the individual and the environment.

Dramatic Action

The major crisis which brings the unified dramatic conflict to a head is not the only crisis in the play: dramatic movement proceeds by a series of changes of equilibrium. Any change of equilibrium constitutes *an action*. The play is a system of *actions*, a system of minor and major changes of equilibrium. The climax of the play is the maximum disturbance of equilibrium which can take place under the given conditions.

We are told that a bit of dialogue or a scene or an entire play has the quality of action, or lacks the quality of action. Since it is generally agreed that this quality is essential to drama, it must be very closely related to the *principle of action* which unifies the whole structure.

The present chapter deals only with action as a quality which gives impact, life and color to certain scenes. St. John Ervine says: "A dramatist, when he talks of action, does not mean bustle or mere physical movement: he means development and growth." Ervine regrets that people are slow to understand this: "When you speak of action to them, they immediately imagine that you mean *doing things*." There can be no question that action involves "development and growth"; but one can sympathize with those who cling to the idea that action means *doing things*. If the conscious will does not cause people to do things, how does it make itself manifest? Development and growth cannot result from inactivity.

George Pierce Baker says that action may be either physical or mental provided it creates *emotional response*. This is of very little value unless we know what constitutes an emotional response. Since what moves us in any action is the spectacle of a change of equilibrium between the individual and the environment, we cannot

speak of any action as being exclusively mental or exclusively physical; the change must affect *both* the individual's mind and the objective reality with which he is in contact. Such a change need not involve bustle or violence, but it must involve *doing something*, because if nothing is done the equilibrium would remain static.

The conscious will is a necessary reference point in studying action, but it cannot be confused with the action itself. We examine the conscious will in order to discover the origin and validity of the action. But we do not see or hear the conscious will. What we see and hear is a physical event, which must be defined in terms of seeing and hearing.

Let us begin by distinguishing *action* (dramatic movement) from *activity* (by which we mean movement in general). Action is a kind of activity, a form of movement in general. The effectiveness of action does not depend on what people do, but on the meaning of what they do... Action may be confined to a minimum of physical activity. But it must be noted that this minimum, however slight, determines the meaning of the action.

Action (as distinguished from activity) must be in *process of becoming*; therefore it must rise out of other action, and must lead to other, and different, action. Each change of equilibrium involves prior and forthcoming changes or equilibrium. The scene must actually achieve a change of equilibrium, both in relation to previous and following scenes and in relation to the movement within the scene itself. If the scene does not produce such a change, the tension is false and the element of action is lacking.

Unity in Terms of Climax

Aristotle spoke simply of "a beginning, a middle and an end." It is obvious that a play which begins by chance and ends because two and one-half hours have passed, is not a play. Its beginning and its end, and the arrangement of the parts in a related design, are dictated by the need of realizing the social conception which constitutes the theme.

In practice, real unity must be a synthesis of theme and action.

Frank Craven (as quoted by Arthur Edwin Krows) suggests: "Get 'em in hot water and get 'em out again."

In outlining his theory that “the drama may be called the art of crises,” Archer tells us that “a dramatic scene is a crisis (or climax) building to an ultimate climax which is the core of the action.” The dramatic scenes are held together by sustained and increasing tension. “A great part of the secret of dramatic architecture lies in the one word, tension; to engender, maintain, suspend, heighten and resolve a state of tension.”

Tension, the “straining forward of interest,” “movement and counter-movement,” are qualities of action; but they do not necessarily imply an action which is organic and complete within itself. If Aristotle is correct in saying that unity of the parts must be “such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed,” there ought to be some definite test of unity, by which we can judge and discard “a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference.”

The unifying force is the *idea*; but an idea, however integral it may be, is in itself undramatic.

St. John Ervine says that “a play should be a living organism, so alive that when any part of it is cut off the body bleeds!”

[E]very detail of the action is determined by the end toward which the action is moving... The climax of the play, being the point of highest tension, gives the fullest expression to the laws of reality as the playwright conceives them. The climax resolves the conflict by a change of equilibrium which creates a new balance of forces: the necessity which makes this event inevitable is the playwright’s necessity: it expresses the social meaning which led him to invent the action... The climax is the concrete realization of the theme in terms of an event. In practical playwriting, this means that the climax is the point of reference by which the validity of every element of the structure can be determined... Does every scene build toward this final statement? Could any event be omitted without disjointing and disturbing the ending?

The climax is the concrete realization of the theme in terms of an event. In practical playwriting, this means that the climax is the point of reference by which the validity of every element of the structure can be determined.

If the climax is the test of the play’s meaning, the climax must be clear enough and strong enough to hold the play together: it must be *an action*, fully developed and involving a definite change of equilibrium between the characters and their environment.

The centering of the action upon a definite goal creates the integrated movement which is the essence of drama.

Many playwrights have pointed to the necessity of testing the action in terms of the ending. "You should not begin your work," said Dumas the Younger, "until you have your concluding scene, movement and speech clear in your mind." Ernest Legouvé gives the same advice: "You ask me how a play is made. By beginning at the end." Percival Wilde is of the same opinion: "Begin at the End and go Back till you come to the Beginning. Then start." The advice to "begin at the end" is sound as far as it goes. But the author who attempts to apply this advice as a cut-and-dried rule will get very meager results; the mechanical act of writing the climax first cannot be of any value unless one understands the function of the climax and the system of cause and effect which binds it to the play as a whole.

The laws of thought which underlie the creative process require that the playwright begin with a root-idea. He may be unconscious of this; he may think that the creative urge springs from random and purposeless thoughts; but disorganized thought cannot lead to organized activity; however vague his social attitude may be, it is sufficiently conscious and purposive to lead him to the volitional representation of action.

There is no doubt that a playwright *may* start with any of these odds and ends of fact or fancy. He *may* complete an entire play by spontaneously piecing together bits of experience and information, without ever attaining the slightest understanding of the principles which underlie his activity. But whether he knows it or not, the process is not as spontaneous as it appears. The "bit of dialogue," or "figure glimpsed in a crowd," or detailed story, do not appeal to him by chance; the reason lies in a point of view which he has developed as a result of his own experience; his point of view is sufficiently definite to make him feel the need of crystallizing it; he wants to find events which have a bearing on the picture of events which he has formed in his mind. When he finds a "bit of dialogue" or a "figure glimpsed in a crowd" or a story, he is not satisfied that this proves or justifies his point of view – if he were satisfied, he would stop right there, and would not be moved to further activity. What he seeks is the most complete volitional representation of the root-idea. The root-idea is abstract, because it is the sum-total of many experiences. He cannot be satisfied until he has turned it into a living event. The root-idea is the beginning of the process. The next step is the discovery of *an action* which expresses the root-idea. This action is the most fundamental action of the play.

There can be no doubt that many playwrights construct the preliminary action of a projected drama without knowing what the climax will be. To some extent, a dramatist may be justified in doing this, because it may be his best means of clarifying his own purpose. But he should be aware of the principles which guide his effort, and which are operative whether or not he is conscious of them. In developing preliminary incidents, he is seeking for the root-action; uncertainty in regard to the root-action indicates uncertainty in regard to the root-idea; the playwright who feels his way toward an unknown climax is confused as to the social meaning of the events with which he is dealing; in order to remedy this conceptual confusion he must be aware of it; he must seek to define his point of view, and to give it living form in the climax.

The Process of Selection

A dramatist *creates* a play. However, one cannot think of the play as being created out of nothing, or out of the abstract oneness of life, or out of the great unknown. On the contrary, the play is created out of materials which are very well known – materials which must be familiar to the audience; otherwise the audience would have no way of establishing contact with the events on the stage. It is not strictly accurate to speak of a dramatist as a person who invents incidents. It is more satisfactory to consider his task as a process of selection. One may conceive of the playwright as someone who enters a huge warehouse, crammed with a supply of possible incidents; theoretically, the contents of the warehouse is unlimited; for each playwright, his field of choice is limited by the extent of his knowledge and experience. In order to select creatively, he must possess a high order of imagination; imagination is the faculty of combining mental- images derived from knowledge and experience so as to give these images fresh meanings and fresh potentialities. These meanings and potentialities appear to be new, but the newness lies in the selection and arrangement.

[T]he root-action¹ is the end of a system of events, the most complete statement of necessity: the previous events *seem* to be a mass of probabilities and possibilities, but when these are selected and arranged, we observe the rational movement of needs and purposes which make the final situation inevitable.

¹ For Lawson, the “root-action” is the climax of a dramatic narrative, inevitably containing within it elements of that narrative’s theme.

[The playwright] is not looking for a chain of cause and effect, but for causes, however diverse, leading to *one effect*. This system of causes is designed to show that the end and scope of the action is inevitable, that it is the rational outcome of a conflict between individuals and their environment.

[The author] does not choose a subject and superimpose a meaning on it. Any meaning that is superimposed is worthless dramatically. He does not draw a lesson from the event; one may more correctly say that he draws the event from the lesson. (The lesson which he wishes to draw is itself based on the sum-total of his experience.)

The structure of the root-action does not so much depend on the previous histories and activities of the characters as upon the relationship of individuals to their environment at a given moment of supreme tension: if this moment is visualized, it tells us so *much* about their characters that we are far better able to reconstruct their previous activities.

The use of the root-action in the process of selection depends on the degree to which it dramatizes the social meaning of an event; it must show a change of equilibrium involving the relationship between individuals and the totality of their environment. If it does not show such a change, it cannot aid the dramatist in an investigation of earlier stages of the conflict between these characters and their environment.

[A]n action represents our concentrated immediate will to get something done; but it also embodies our previous experience and our conception of future probability. If we consider an action as a disturbance of equilibrium, we observe that the laws of its movement resemble those of a combustion engine: compression produces the explosion, which in turn produces an extension of energy; the degree of extension corresponds to the degree of energy.

The root-action is an explosion which causes a maximum change of equilibrium between individuals and their environment. The complexity and force of this *effect* depends on the complexity and force of the *causes* which led to the explosion. The extension of the inner action is limited to the causes which lie in the conscious wills of the characters. The extension of the outer action is limited to the social causes which constitute the framework of fact within which the action moves. For purposes of analysis, we view this double system of events as a system of *causes*: as it

actually appears on the stage it appears as a system of *effects*. We do not see or hear the exercise of the conscious will; we do not see or hear the forces which constitute the environment. But the dramatic meaning of what we see and hear lies in its causes: the total effect (as projected in the root action) depends on the totality of causes.

The Social Framework

In planning the wider framework of the play, the dramatist is organizing material which is obviously less dramatic than the play itself. Events which are assumed to have happened before the opening of the drama, or which are reported during the action, or which take place off-stage or between the acts, cannot be as vital as the visible action behind the footlights. But it must not be supposed that the outer framework is a shadowy fiction, covered by a few vague references to the past lives of the characters and the social forces of the period. Since the larger pattern of events represents the scope of the playwright's conception, it must be dramatized as fully as possible. The playwright who thinks of the ultimate causes underlying his drama in narrative terms, will carry over some of this narrative form into the stage-action. By visualizing these ultimate causes in meaningful and cumulative crises, the playwright establishes the basis for the later and more detailed selection of the stage-action. The reserve of events, behind and around the play, gives sweep and sureness to the action, and gives more meaning to every line of dialogue, every gesture, every situation.

Dramatic Continuity

[T]ension derives from the force of the conflict, not from uncertainty as to its outcome. There is no artificial suspense as far as the story is concerned; the tension is sustained solely by the selection and arrangement of events.

Let us examine the anatomy of these events: what happens is really a cycle of activity which may be expressed as follows: a decision to follow a certain course of action, tension developed in fulfilling the decision, an unexpected triumph, and a new complication which requires another decision on a higher plane. Each triumph is the culmination of an act of will, which produces a change of equilibrium between individuals and their environment. This change requires new adjustments, and makes the new complications inevitable. The play is laid out in three such cycles.

One thing is very clear about these three cycles: each one is shorter than the previous one, the points of tension are more pronounced and the explanatory action *between* the points of tension is cut down. In the third cycle, the events are grouped closely together and each event in the last cycle is itself a first-rate point of crisis, involving a decisive act of will on the part of the characters.

The development of tension must be unified in reference to the point of climax toward which the tension is building.

If we examine each of the cycles we find that each one is a small replica of the construction of a play, involving exposition, rising action, clash, and climax. Having selected the high points of the action, the playwright exercises great care in preparing and building the tension, so that these scenes will dominate.

Thus the developing tension reaches a moment of maximum tension, in which the balance of forces is changed, and a new situation is created which leads to a new series of tensions. This is not a matter of presenting the natural *flow* of events; the activity must be compressed and heightened; the speed of the development and the point of explosion must be determined in reference to the climax of the cycle and the climax of the whole play.

[T]he validity of the scene or character in the dramatic scheme does not depend on its relation to events in general, but on its use-value in relation to the root-action. The purpose of the play is to prove that the root-action is probable and necessary. Therefore nothing in the play which is essential to the development of the climax can be improbable – unless the climax itself is improbable.

The notion that a play is an unbroken line of cause and effect is a dangerous one, because it prevents the piling up of diverse forces driving toward the climax.

The complex action in Shakespeare's plays never fails to drive forward toward a point of maximum tension. When these plays appear diffuse to modern audiences, it is due to inadequate productions and failure to understand the conceptions on which the plays are based. Shakespeare does not hesitate to introduce new elements and separate lines of causation. The conflict is not a matter of "one thing leading to another," but a great battle in which many forces are marshaled to a final test of strength.

“Retardation,” says [Arthur Edwin] Krows, “should always add something to the action proper.” The playwright, he continues, can achieve “power in delay.” This is true, but the real power lies, not in the delay, but in the introduction of new forces which create a new balance of power and thus make the delay necessary and progressive. This increases the tension, because it increases the possibilities of exposition which are inherent in the situation and which *will* explode at the moment of climax.

The principles of continuity may be summed up as follows: (1) the exposition must be fully dramatized in terms of action; (2) the exposition must present possibilities of extension which are equal to the extension of the stage action; (3) two or more lines of causation may be followed if they find their solution in the root-action; (4) the rising action is divided into an indeterminate number of cycles; (5) each cycle is an action and has the characteristic progression of an action – exposition, rise, clash and climax; (6) the heightening of the tension as each cycle approaches its climax is accomplished by *increasing the emotional load*; this can be done by emphasizing the importance of what is happening, by underlining fear, courage, anger, hysteria, hope; (7) tempo and rhythm are important in maintaining and increasing tension; (8) the linking of scenes is accomplished by abrupt contrast or by overlapping of interest; (9) as the cycles approach the root-action, the tempo is increased, the subsidiary climaxes are more intense and grouped more closely together, and the action between the points is cut down; (10) probability and coincidence do not depend on physical probability, but on the value of the incident in relation to the root-action; (11) the play is not a simple continuity of cause and effect, but the interplay of complex forces; new forces may be introduced without preparation provided their *effect* on the action is manifest; (12) tension depends on the emotional load which the action will bear before the moment of explosion is reached.

Exposition

Theatre textbooks recognize the dangers of static or unimaginative exposition; but it is suggested that the dramatist must overcome these dangers by his skill in handling undramatic material. Baker says that the playwright “is writing supposedly for people who, except on a few historical subjects, know nothing of his material. If so, as soon as possible, he must make them understand: (1) who his people are; (2) where his people are; (3) the time of the play; and (4) what in the present and past relations of his characters causes the story.” It is true that this information must be conveyed; since the exposition is part of the play and is subject to the rules of dramatic conflict, the information must be dramatized. Baker’s points – the

questions, *who*, *where* and *when* – are included in the present and past relationships which cause the story. If the dramatist is interested only in the story as he intends to tell it in stage-action, and if he has failed to analyze the social framework, he is sure to present the expository material in its most static form. If one regards the beginning of the drama as an absolute beginning, one cannot give dramatic vitality to the presentation of preliminary facts, however useful the facts may be. Explanations are explanations, no matter how shrewdly they may be concealed. As long as the opening scenes are regarded as explanatory, they are sure to be dull or undeveloped; the playwright is looking ahead; he is anxious to clear the ground and get down to the serious business of the play.

[T]he beginning of a play is not absolute; it is a point in a larger story; it is a point which can be clearly defined, and which is necessarily a very exciting point in the development of the story – because it is the point at which a dangerous decision is made.

The curtain cannot rise on a man making up his mind concerning something we know nothing about. The term exposition, as applied to the first cycle of the action is not altogether a misnomer; all action contains expository elements; the climax of the play is expository, because it exposes additional facets of the situation, additional information and possibilities. The opening of a play presents an individual or group of individuals who are undertaking a momentous conflict which is forced on them by circumstances. It is apparent that these circumstances must be dramatic; since the decision is so important that it covers all the possibilities of the play, it must be the result of considerable changes of equilibrium between the individuals and their environment. These disturbances cannot be described, but must be seen and felt at the moment when their impact on the conscious will causes a change or intensification of the individual's needs and purposes. Since the exposition covers the possibilities of the drama, it must be more closely connected with the root-action than any other part of the play. It is this connection which holds the play together; as the scope of the action is defined in the climax, so its scope is visioned in the exposition. The unity of cause and effect which operates throughout the play is essentially the unity between the exposition and the climax. This leads us to a more exact understanding of the way in which the selection of the play's point of departure is determined. Having selected the climax as the embodiment of his conception of necessity, the playwright will select for his opening, the event which seems to him to embody the most direct and most real cause of this necessity.

The opening scenes show the setting up of a goal under conditions which make the setting up of such a goal seem necessary. New information is presented and new difficulties are added in the course of the play; there are progressive changes both in the characters and the environment. But at the moment of climax, we must be able to refer directly back to the first scene; the social causes which are manifest in the climax must have been present in the original conditions.

The setting up of a goal at the beginning of the play must have been caused by the same *real* forces which dominate the climax.

The opening of the play is the point at which these forces have their maximum effect on the will giving it the direction which is sustained throughout the play. Causes introduced later are subordinate, because the introduction of a stronger cause would change the conditions of the action and would destroy the play's unity.

[A] play does not always begin with the forming of a brand-new line of conduct. The purpose may have existed previously; but it is forced into the open in the expository conflict; the climax of the exposition exposes the meaning and scope of the decision, and thus creates a change of equilibrium between the individuals and their environment. The first cycle of the rising action develops out of this changed balance of forces.

Progression

[T]he changes in character and environment which constitute the play's progression lie in the rising action. This means that there are more cycles of movement in the rising action; the cycles are not only consecutive; they overlap and have varying degrees of extension. The progression depends on the movement of these subsidiary actions. If we observe an action as we actually perform it in our daily experience, we find that any action (regardless of its scope) consists in (a) the *decision* (which includes the consciousness of the aim and of the possibilities of its accomplishment); (b) the *grappling with difficulties* (which are more or less expected, because the decision has included a consideration of possibilities); (c) *the test of strength* (the moment toward which we have been heading, when, having done our best to evade or overcome the difficulties, we face the success or failure of the action); (d) the *climax* (the moment of maximum effort and realization).

It may appear, at first glance, that the obligatory scene is the same as the climax; but there is a very important difference between the *expected clash* and the *final clash*.

The former is the point upon which we concentrate our efforts, and which we believe will be the point of maximum tension. This belief is based on our judgment of our environment; but our judgment is not one hundred percent correct. We find that our expectation has been tricked, and that the clash toward which we have been working reveals a balance of forces which does not correspond to our former picture of the situation. This leads to redoubled effort, to a new and final test of possibilities. The obligatory scene may, in certain instances, be almost identical with the climax in time and place; but there is a great difference in its function; the difference is essential to our understanding of an action, because it is this contradiction between the thing we do and the result of the thing we do which energizes the dramatic movement. This contradiction exists in all the subordinate cycles of action, and creates the progression. This is not a matter of cause and effect – it is rather a sharp break between cause as it seemed and effect as it turns out. This happens, in a minor degree, throughout the course of the drama: the characters are *continually* realizing differences between what they intended and what is actually going on; they are thus forced to revise their consciousness of reality and increase their effort; this is what, literally, keeps them *moving*; the more important moments at which such a recognition occurs are the obligatory scenes of the various cycles of action. The break between cause and effect leads to the *actual* effect, the culmination of the action. For this reason, the climax invariably contains the element of surprise; it is beyond our expectation, and is the result of a break in the expected development of the action. This is the *dramatic* element in any situation, and constitutes the most essential difference between dramatic action and human activity in general. In the more prosaic activities of our daily lives, there are no obligatory scenes; we do not pause to recognize any sharp break between cause and effect; we simply adjust ourselves and proceed to get the thing done, as best we can. We are interested in the results, rather than in the significance, of events. It is only when we undertake actions of unusual scope that the sequence is broken by the recognition of the difference between the probabilities as we had estimated them and the necessities as they loom ahead of us. When this happens, events become dramatic.

A play may contain any number of lesser cycles of action, but these can invariably be grouped in four divisions; since the rising action is the longest of the divisions and includes a larger number of sub-divisions, the movement of the play is somewhat as follows:

AbcdefGH

A is the exposition; b c d e f are the cycles of the rising action; G is the obligatory scene; H is the climax. A may contain two or more cycles of action. G and H are more concentrated, but may also include several cycles. Since an action is our *unit of movement*, we are able to divide any of the subordinate actions in the same way. For example, c reaches a climax which is the culmination of a system of action of which the exposition, rising action, and obligatory scene may be traced. The whole group, b c d e f also constitutes a system, of which b may be the exposition, c and d the rising action, e the obligatory scene and f the climax. This would be comparatively simple if it were a matter of direct sequence, if each division and cycle were complete in itself, beginning where the other left off and proceeding to a climax. But the action is woven of a multiplicity of threads which are unified in terms of the play's root-action. The threads leading to any subordinate climax are also unified in terms of this climax, but these threads are woven through the other parts of the play.

Since tension depends on the balance of forces in conflict, it seems reasonable to conclude that if conflict is avoided, tension will be fatally relaxed. But the interest of the spectators *must* be sustained. It follows that the drama of today has developed extraordinary facility in maintaining fictitious tension. The most common method of sustaining audience-interest without progression is the use of *surprise*. This device is employed unsparingly; it has, in fact, become the basic technique of the modern drama.

Lessing points out that surprises which are easily achieved "will never give rise to anything great." He describes the sort of play which is "a collection of little artistic tricks by means of which we effect nothing more than a short surprise." Archer makes a similar comment: "We feel that the author has been trifling with us in inflicting on us this purely mechanical and momentary scare."

One must bear in mind the distinction between surprise which *legitimately carries the action forward*, and surprise which *negates the action*. The distinction is not difficult to make: we recall that one of the forms of reversal of fortune to which Aristotle referred was the "anagnorisis" or recognition scene, the finding of friends or enemies unexpectedly. Aristotle used this as a rather mechanical formula, but when we examine Greek tragedy we find that the reversal of fortune is invariably accompanied by *recognition* of the persons or forces which bring about the change. The messenger reveals himself, the effect is the opposite of what was expected, forcing Oedipus to recognize a change and to face a new problem. We have already pointed out that it is this *recognition* of the difference between what was expected and what takes place which drives the action forward. In this sense, surprise is the

essence of drama, and is present in every movement of the action. But recognition of the break between cause and effect is very different from ignoring or evading the logic of events. “Nothing,” says Lessing, “is more offensive than that of which we do not know the cause.”

The Obligatory Scene

Archer defines the obligatory scene as “one which the audience (more or less clearly and consciously) foresees and desires, and the absence of which it may with reason resent.” Sarcey says, “It is precisely this expectation mingled with uncertainty which is one of the charms of the theatre.” These comments are important, because they both stress the principle of expectation as it affects the *audience*. The sustained interest with which the spectators follow the action may undoubtedly be described as “expectation mingled with uncertainty.” The degree of expectation and uncertainty are variable. But the decisive point toward which the action seems to be driving must be the point concerning which there is the greatest expectation and the smallest uncertainty. The characters of the play have made a decision; the audience must understand this decision and must be aware of its possibilities.

Since the spectators do not know what the climax will be, they cannot test the action in terms of climax. They *do* test it in terms of their expectation, which is concentrated on what they believe to be the necessary outcome of the action – the obligatory scene. Archer feels that the obligatory scene is not really obligatory: he warns us against the assumption “that there can be no good play without a *scène à faire*.” To be sure, he is using the term in a narrow and somewhat mechanical sense. But no play can fail to provide a point of concentration toward which the maximum expectation is aroused. The audience requires such a point of concentration in order to define its attitude toward the events.

Just as the climax furnishes us with a test by which we can analyze the action *backward*, the obligatory scene offers us an additional check on the *forward* movement of the action. The climax is the basic event, which causes the rising action to grow and flower. The obligatory scene is the immediate goal toward which the play is driving. The climax has its roots in the social conception. The obligatory scene is rooted in activity; it is the physical outgrowth of the conflict.

The obligatory scene represents the point of foreseen and expected crisis, toward which the progression is moving. It is the physical culmination of the conflict. The climax goes beyond the physical drive, and exposes the social root and meaning of the action.

Climax

Freytag's famous pyramid has had a great (and unfortunate) influence on dramatic theory. According to Freytag, the action of a play is divided into five parts: "(a) introduction; (b) rise; (c) climax; (d) return or fall; (e) catastrophe." The falling action includes "the beginning of counter-action" and "the moment of last suspense." The rising action and the falling action are of equal importance. "These two chief parts of the drama are firmly united by a point of the action which lies directly in the middle. The middle, the climax of the play, is the most important place of the structure; the action rises to this; the action falls away from this."

Every conflict contains in itself the germs of solution, the creation of a new balance of forces which will in turn lead to further conflict. The point of highest tension is necessarily the point at which the new balance of forces is created.

Characterization

The law that progression must spring from the decisions of the characters applies not only to the leading figures, but to all the subordinate persons in the drama. The neglect of this law often leads the playwright to make a curious distinction between the leading characters and the subordinate persons in the story: two or three central figures are seen purely in terms of character, the attempt being made to subordinate the action to the presentation of what are supposed to be their qualities and emotions. But all the minor characters are treated in exactly the opposite way, being used as automatons who are shuffled about to suit the needs of the leading persons.

Conflict-in-Motion

The motion picture portrays a conflict in which the conscious will, exerted for the accomplishment of specific and understandable aims, is sufficiently strong to bring the conflict to a point of crisis.