

What Makes a Work of Literature Last Through Time and Able to Cross Frontiers?

– the DNA of a play.

The question is often asked: what makes a play last through time and able to cross frontiers? To answer this question we need to break down the structure of a dramatic work into its DNA. If we can identify the DNA structure of a play we might then be able to identify which part of the structure makes it last through time. To do this I would like briefly to look at my own work which, it is supposed, I know most about.

The first observation to be made is that we are not talking about categories. All writers hope that the texture of their work is too rich and varied to be reduced to the simple categories frequently applied by journalists who are too rushed to reflect at any serious level, and by some academics who should know better. If you've heard of me at all it will probably be under the nonsense category of "social realist" – a term which means little and blinds a public to the many other aspects of my work which I've struggled to cultivate: the lyrical, the paradoxical, the absurd, the ironic, the musical, the farcical and so on.

To begin – a confession: my power for invention is slight. I can invent nothing more extraordinary than what happens around me, or what I'm told happens to others. I mostly write about what I experience. The plays do not pursue what is absurd if what I've experienced does not call for the absurd. When it does call for it, I use it! Nor is irony employed when tenderness is called for; nor is

the mood pervaded with lyricism if the mood requires harsh naturalism. Life comes at me too multifaceted to make a fetish of only one aspect of it, reality is too complex to be recreated in only one mould which then becomes a mannerism. I worry about writers who straight-jacket their material into personal mannerisms which are then described mistakenly as their “voice”, or their “style”. I try to allow my material to dictate its own *inherent* style.

No doubt you will find critics and academics who do not share a view of my work as rich and varied. They may be right. After all they are wise men and women who are honored for their wisdom by being appointed academics and critics. But no one is surprised to find a writer who believes his work *is* rich and varied. Rich and varied in what, though?

Let us try to imagine the thought process applied by academics and literary commentators to the categorizing of works of drama. You might find one who had lumped together my first five plays – *The Kitchen*, *The Trilogy*, *Chips With Everything* – in order to show how they were mainly autobiographical. Those academics might then go on to describe the next two – *Their Very Own and Golden City* and *The Four Seasons* – as being works of a metaphorical nature because the plays use strong images to represent something else: the cycle of the four seasons as a metaphor for the cycle of love coming and fading away; the failure to build the cities of our dreams as a metaphor for the compromises life forces upon us. They might then put *The Wedding Feast*, *Shylock*, and *Caritas* together and show how these plays had their roots in other people’s stories – one based on a story by Dostoevsky called “A Nasty Incident”; one based on the same medieval stories Shakespeare used for “The Merchant of Venice”; the last, based on a true story about an anchoress of the 13th Century. Or they’d put *Shylock* and *Caritas* together with *Blood Libel* and talk about them as historical plays – *Blood Libel* being about the first ever calumny of blood libel leveled at the tiny

Jewish community of Norwich in 1144. They might, if they had a sense of humour, then go on to talk about “Wesker’s blue and bawdy period” citing *One More Ride on The Merry-Go Round* and *Lady Othello* – both very Rabelaisian love stories. What they would really enjoy talking about is something they’d probably label as my “minimalist period”, academics love labels like that. Minimalist! for which they might lump together *Chips With Everything*, *The Old Ones*, *Caritas*, *Annie Wobbler* and the entire cycle of *Plays For One Woman*.

All that would be a way of looking at the work: neat groupings, tidy and orderly, packaged for study in university. But I don’t think such packaging would be rewarding. Far more rewarding – I’d humbly suggest – would be to consider the DNA of plays under the headings of “Elements, subjects, themes, qualities, narrative and perceptions”. Such a breakdown might discover the work to be richer and more varied than was previously thought.

Let’s look at the first of the parts - **element**. What do we mean by “element”? I offer four examples of what I mean by “element”. The first is “relationship”. The basic element in all literature is relationships – lovers, friends, parent/child; oppressor/oppressed; employer/employee; brother/sister ... you yourselves can complete the list. Relationships – the first example of an “element”.

“Nature” in literature is another example of an “element”. Just as historians have come to recognise that geographical situation and climate affect the evolution of a people – those who live in the mountains are different from those who live by the sea, those in the cold north are different from those who live nearer the equator – so nature can affect the course of events in the unfolding of a drama. Nature – the second example of an “element”.

I would name “femininity” as another **element** in art. (“Masculinity”, too, but I’m more interested in women.) The feminine nature is a strong and determining factor in the telling of

a tale. When discussing the feminine nature passions seethe and become hot but it can't be denied that from that first of all myths to have shaped Western civilization – the story of Eve (the woman who knew a good thing when she saw it and courageously bit the apple of knowledge, unlike Adam who wanted to remain a good boy stuck forever in boring old paradise) – since the story of Eve the nature of femininity has been an animating **element** in all art.

“Food” is a fourth example of another element. It is said that “we are what we eat”. And within **element** is found **subject, theme, and qualities**.

Let's look at **subject** and **theme** together. I can give a simple example of what I mean by “**subject**”. If a writer uses in drama the “**element**” of “femininity” then they have many choices of **subject** through which to explore this **element**. “Mother” for example, or the mistress, the daughter, the wife. The nature of femininity is the **element**; wife, mother, mistress or daughter is the **subject** through which the nature of femininity can be explored.

If the nature of femininity was the **element** and mother was the **subject** then we could surf through literature, or drama and discover an author who has chosen to write about the mother in order to explore the **theme** of “possessiveness”, or “jealousy”, or “love”, or “sacrifice” and so on.

Femininity is the **element**, mother is the **subject**, sacrifice is the **theme**.

We come to **qualities**.

Qualities are to do with the method the writers use to explore their **elements, subjects and themes**. But unfortunately, to complicate matters, there are two categories of quality: **personal quality**, and **quality of technique**.

Quality of technique is to do with the way a work is visualized, its construction, rhythm, the quality of its dialogue. The visual setting, for example, is an intrinsic part of a story, often a metaphor for the **theme**. I wrote a play called *Caritas* in which

the devotional cell, where a young woman had asked to be walled up so that she could live as pure a life as possible away from the chaos of everyday life, becomes a metaphor for the prisons we all create for ourselves whether of religious belief, political ideology or marriage. Our metaphors as dramatists are part of our technique.

So, too, is the play's construction. The play needs to be constructed dynamically. The scenes or episodes within the play need to be rhythmically placed alongside each other. The dialogue demands its own kind of musicality. The way we assemble our moments, string out a character's lines – all this is to do with the **quality of technique**.

Personal quality is to do with the feelings with which a writer handles material. Qualities like humour, irony, gaiety, malice, pity. How sensitive is the writer? What **personal quality** of feeling does the writer have for their characters and their character's predicament?

Embracing, or coloring, or perhaps the word “informing” is a more accurate word to use – *informing* all these first four aspects of playwriting is the fifth: **perception**.

Perception is to do with the emotional and intellectual power a writer brings to bear on the understanding of his or her material. A playwright may select an important theme, handle it with a skilful quality of technique, and paint it with an attractive personal quality of humour but – *if the writer's capacity to perceive a deep truth about their theme is weak then the work is weak*.

A writer's “voice” is identified not by an instantly recognizable trick of dialogue – but by the way their intelligence and sensitivity perceives their experience of life. We may admire technical skills but they are not what makes a work of drama great enough to last through time. We may say of a writer: “Oh, they handle dialogue so expertly, you can hear it comes out of the mouths of *real* people”, but dialogue is not what carries a play across frontiers – we all know what can be lost or changed in

translation. Something more is needed. Besides, technical skills are pre-requisites, they are the *least* we expect from a playwright. It is like saying the carpenter handles his tools expertly. Yes! but is the chair beautiful to look at? And the joints may fit together with great precision but has the carpenter understood the shape and needs of the body so that the chair is comfortable to sit on?

So with the play: vibrant dialogue, effortless structure, recognizable characters, a noble theme, but – how powerful is the intelligence, how sharp is the sensitivity that has informed the writer's perceptions? At what depth has human motivation been perceived? What perceptive insight has illuminated the human condition? Skills invite our admiration but perceptions touch hearts and stimulate intellect, and in such a way that they may even change our lives.

Surrounding all these aspects of writing is the last part of this DNA structure – **narrative**. The story! The framework within which we come to know the **elements, subjects, themes, qualities** and **perceptions** of the writer. Sometimes it is just simply the story which carries the power of the writer's perceptions.

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

And God said to Satan "look what a splendid man is my servant, Job". To which Satan replied "yes, but that's because you've made things easy for him. Of course he'll praise you and follow in your laws – you've blessed him with so much. But", Satan said to God:

But put forth thine hand now and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face.

And God said to Satan "OK. Do it! I give you permission to give Job hell and see what he'll say." And so Satan gave Job hell. But - Job remained firm and faithful and God gave him back the cattle he lost and the sons and daughters Satan had caused to die.

A powerful story. Not one about an eternal truth – for we know that sometimes no matter how righteous we are, no matter how much we may please God yet we still often lose what is dear to us. But it's a marvelous biblical story about the truth of human *aspirations*. We all desire to be firm and faithful to something or other. Few of us succeed but the story of Job echoes a vivid human dream that remains on and on, a dream of the ideal person we'd all like to be.

This is a brief exploration of the question: what makes a work of art travel through time and across frontiers? Much more can be said. You can disagree with my "DNA structure" and substitute your own parts. I've not touched on the role of language for example, that texture of prose which can be a continuous source of delight making the work last through the centuries. But prose, as with dialogue, comes up against the problem of translation. Balzac's novels or the novels of Dostoevsky don't speak to us over the years because of the French or Russian language. Few of us speak those languages well enough. If the prose is a contributing quality making Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* last in France it is not one to which we can claim in English-speaking countries. If the novel lasts for us then we must look to identify something else, some other parts. If it is the strength of Chekhov's dialogue that make his plays constantly performed in Russia, that is not a quality we can claim in English. If Chekhov lasts for us through time then we must look for other explanations than the strength of his dialogue. And I put it to you, I suggest to you, that of all the DNA parts of a work of drama it is the writer's power of perception which carries his or her work over the centuries and across national frontiers.

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