

European and American Drama in English Literary Studies: Inevitability or Alternatives?

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Abstract

Questions have been raised in regard to what constitute English drama studied in English literary studies. Are they drama written by English playwrights, those written in English, or the ones that are translated into English regardless the nationality of the playwright? This article aims to examine the choices of the English plays studied in English drama class in Indonesia. Common practice shows that the choices cover a range of plays either originally written in or translated into English. European and American drama, meaning drama written by European and American playwrights, are more likely to constitute the so called English drama. The emphasis of the English drama class, be it the types or nature of drama, plays an important role in choosing the plays to be studied. Different approach to the design of drama will also result in a different set of English drama that is considered to be suitable. Therefore, European and American drama can be either inevitability or alternatives in English drama class.

Introduction

Studies in English literature in universities in Indonesia usually comprise, among other subjects, three major genres of imaginative literature: the so called English prose, poetry and drama. With the choice of thousands of literary works belonging to the literary canon, a body of literary works that are decidedly valued by scholars and constantly being taught as the core curriculum for literary studies over time, the set of chosen literary works to be taught in a particular class in a particular semester would vary. The selected novels taught in an English prose class may consist of, for example, those narrative fictions written by Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens and the Brontë or novels written by female writers from Romanticism period including Jane Austen and Mary Robinson. Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are among the many English poets whose works are incorporated in the English literary canon. The greatest playwright of all time, William Shakespeare wrote a number of plays that can be discussed in an English drama class. A teacher

may also find other playwrights, such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Harold Pinter, worth exploring. In addition to the many literary works authored by English writers, it is quite common to find literary works written by non-English authors being discussed in English literature classes. Leo Tolstoy, Franz Kafka, Toni Morrison, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Henrik Ibsen, Samuel Beckett, and Arthur Miller are a few of influential writers whose works are deemed valuable to analyze in the so called English prose, poetry and drama classes.

Plays written by such playwrights as Henrik Ibsen, Samuel Beckett, and Arthur Miller are likely to be discussed in an English drama class. All of them are not English people. Henrik Ibsen is a Norwegian playwright, Samuel Beckett a French, and Arthur Miller an American. Arthur Miller's plays are written in English. Samuel Beckett writes both in French and English. Henrik Ibsen's plays are translated into English. Therefore, in terms of language, their plays are accessible. What constitute English drama then? Plays written by English playwrights are definitely included. What about those written in English but not by English playwrights or the ones that are translated into English by non English authors? This article aims to examine the choices of the English plays that most likely be studied in an English drama class in Indonesia to show that European and American drama can be inevitability or choices in constituting English drama discussed in an English drama class.

Types of Drama

Drama is believed to be originated from religious rituals honoring the Greek god Dionysus, the god of nature and fertility. The rituals of life and death became the origin of tragedy, while the fertility rites grew to become comedy. Many experts divide drama into two major genres: tragedy and comedy. Tragedy may be defined as “a drama of a serious and dignified character that typically describes the development of conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (such as destiny, circumstance, or society) and reaches a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion” (Merriam-Webster, 1995: 1126). Greek tragedy, as observed by Aristotle, follows a number of principles, such as the imitation of actions that causes the audience pity and fear that lead to the appropriate purgation (catharsis) from those emotions. In

modern tragedies, the Greek concept of tragic hero that requires persons of high standing alters as a common man is considered apt to be a tragic hero in a tragedy (Miller, 1989: 744). Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is such a play for it has a salesman as the tragic hero. Unlike tragedy, comedy deals with life in a lighter manner and is aimed to amuse the audience. In terms of plot, while tragedy ends tragically, comedy has a happy ending. The combination of tragic and comic elements results in a literary genre called tragicomedy.

In the 19th century, literary movements such as realism influences drama. Realism insists on the accurate representation of life, that art "must deal with people as they are and life as it is lived – no matter how trivial or sordid – rather than romantic sketches of what the author thought they should be" (Hubenka & Gracia, 1973: 284-5). The prominent figures of realism in the theater include Henrik Ibsen, August Strinberg, and Anton Chekhov. A number of European dramatists in the 1950s and 1960s take on the belief that human life is fundamentally absurd and devoid of purpose. Those dramatists: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter to name a few, created a collection of dramatic works called theater of the absurd. Overlooking most logical structure of traditional theaters, the absurd drama combines meaningless behavior and bizarre conversation to emphasize the absurdity of life. Theater of the absurd is included in the Theater of the Avant-garde which embrace French and Russian symbolism, Italian Futurism, German expressionism, and Dada-Surrealism (Cardullo and Knopf, 2001).

English Drama = European and American Drama?

The tradition of English drama is said to begin in the medieval time with the early form of drama called miracle plays that developed into morality plays (Inglis & Spear, 1952: 54-8). Miracle plays were originally performed in church as the clergy started to assume that what drew people to church was the craving for entertainment rather than religious teaching. Scenes from the Bibles were acted in miracle plays to give religious instructions. The productions of miracle plays were later taken over by the trade guilds that performed their plays in inn-yards or public squares. Miracle plays soon after developed into more secular plays, whose spirit was still religious, called morality plays, allegorical plays personifying vices and virtues with the name

of characters such as Death, Charity, Pride, and Truth. Though more secular, morality plays shared the same didactic purpose as miracle plays. As the didactic elements became less and less, artistic drama emerged and drama developed into a new kind of entertainment that reached its golden age in the Elizabethan period. Renaissance with its interest in the classics, the old Greek and Roman works of literature, influence the development of English drama that flourished in the Elizabethan age. The age gave birth to Christopher Marlowe, a poet and predecessor of William Shakespeare, the greatest playwright of all time. Drama declined in the periods following the Elizabethan age. Drama can be said to start its revival during Victorian age with Oscar Wilde, a playwright whose satirical comedies are still popular to the present days. The twentieth century witnesses the works of English playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Elliott, and Harold Pinter.

When one wants to teach English drama by dividing the plays into comedy and tragedy, s/he can start by selecting some Greek comedies by Aristophanes, such as *Lysistrata* and tragedies by Sophocles that include the well-known tragedy *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. The choices of Greek tragedy and comedy would be justified as there are reliable English translations of those plays. Besides, it is in the Greek tragedies that one can see the application of classical tragic structure, action, and unity which was then adapted by the Elizabethan and even some more modern tragedies. William Shakespeare wrote a number of tragedies and comedies that can be chosen as needed. More modern tragedies include Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen's works that represent realism and American playwrights Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neil's many unquestionably successful tragedies. Ben Johnson's play *Every Man out of his Humor* is considered as an Elizabethan comedy. Those interested in comedy of manners can pick up French playwright Molière's *The Misanthrope*, the English author Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* or George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and *Major Barbara*.

When one is interested to include the Theatre of the Avant-garde, s/he would have to choose among the works of European playwrights including August Strindberg, Umberto Boccioni, Tristan Zara, Andre Breton, and Antony Artaud. Theater of the Avant-Garde also comprises plays belonging to theater of the absurd such as the French Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*,

Arthur Adamov's *The Invasion*, Jean Genet's *The Maids*, and the English Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, all of which can be said as representing what Esslin calls "a similar sense of the senselessness of life, the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose" (2001: 501). Expressionism, which presents the subjective or subliminal thought and emotions of the artist or the internal realities of life, can be seen in the play by the American playwright Elmer Rice: *The Adding Machine* and the German Reinhard Sorge: *The Beggar* and the Swedish August Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*.

When plays are chosen based on thematic approach, a number of playwrights with diverse themes are available. Men in search of personal identity are represented in, for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*. In *Oedipus Rex*, King Oedipus dutifully keeps his noble promise to find and punish the murderer of the previous king so that the wellbeing of his people can be restored, only to eventually find out that he is the murderer he has been looking for. Nora of *A Doll's House* secretly committed forgery to save her ailing husband. When the secret is revealed, her husband accuses her of destroying his reputable social standing and outrageously repudiates her. Knowing later that his social reputation is safe, Nora's husband appeal for Nora to stay, but Nora declares her independence of her husband and her children and leaves the house. *The Adding Machine* depicts the clash between the human spirit and the dehumanizing technology. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* may be said as representing the battle of the sexes. In the Greek comedy *Lysistrata*, the women assemble to boycott their husbands and lovers by not giving them sex until the men agree to stop the wars among them. Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* presents a group of men and women visiting a house in which the owner is found dead and Minnie Wright, the suspected wife is held for custody. The men try to find evidence against Minnie while ignoring the trifles, which the women are able to knot. After gaining a new understanding of their identities as women, they decide to keep the evidence and thus save Minnie from conviction. Katherine and Bianca are the sisters in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The first is beautiful but shrew and the latter submissive, obedient and gentle. The canny Petruchio tries to subdue Katherine's temper and win her dowry. Though being

constantly insulted, Petruchio courts, wins and tames Katherine, eventually succeed in making her an obedient wife.

The above description illustrates how the selection of plays in an English drama class can encompass plays by English playwrights, non-English playwrights written in English, and non-English playwrights translated into English. In such case, European and American drama become the dominating alternatives. The reason might be as simple as the fact that many literary movements are originated in Europe, and the said movements leave their traces in the development of European drama including English plays. Many European playwrights and their works are internationally appreciated, and when their plays are not written in English, some will be translated into English that ensures wider reception. Let's not forget that the widely acclaimed classics are the Old Greek and Roman works of literature, including Greek and Roman tragedies and comedies whose English translations have become more accessible.

Although not as old as English drama, American drama has a tradition that expands from the colonial time in the eighteenth century to the contemporary. The periods of American drama can be divided into the beginning, consisting of drama written during the time of American Colonial to the Civil War and Civil War to World War I, modern, and contemporary (Watt & Richardson, 1994). The American drama also possesses a diversity of themes, from slavery, racism, wars, and feminism to gender queer. Examples include Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859) that portrays slavery, Langston Hughes' *Mulatto* (1935) that raises issue of racism between the white and the black in a plantation located in Georgia, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) with issues related to wars, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) presenting feminism concerns, and David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988) in which orientalism and gender queer are put into question.

Inevitability or Alternatives?

It should not be surprising then to see a literary anthology placing a selection of European and American plays. In their book, *The Design of Drama*, Hubenka & Gracia (1973) suggest the generic approach toward drama that consist of tragedy, comedy, realism, expressionism, theatricalism, total theater, Anti-theater, and the

film. The plays **include those** written by Sophocles, **Aristophanes**, **William Shakespeare**, **Geore Bernard Shaw**, **Henrik Ibsen**, **Elmer Rice**, **August Strindberg**, **Jean Anouih**, and **Paul Carter Harrison**. **Kennedy and Gioia (2002)** select a number of plays and essays under the headings: **The Theater of Sophocles**, **The Theater of Shakespeare**, and **The Modern Theater** which include plays by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Tom Stoppard, and Samuel Beckett. **Bergman & Epstein (1987)** includes chapters discussing drama with the following titles: **Tragedy**, **Comedy**, **The Rise of Realism**, and **New Directions** that comprise varied playwrights such as Sophocles, John Millington Synge, Tennessee Williams, William Shakespeare, Arthur Miller, Molière, Henrik Ibsen, Lorraine Hansberry, Sam Sephard, and Beth Henley. In addition to most of the playwrights discussed by Bergman & Epstein, **Roberts & Jacobs (2007)** add to their anthology of drama the works of Anton Chekhov, Langston Hughes, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Betty Keller and Eugene O'Neill. Does the selection of plays in those four literary anthologies exemplify the inevitability of including European and American drama in English literary studies?

An English drama teacher can actually stick to Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies, histories and romances yet is still able to obtain diverse themes as Shakespeare is well-known in incorporating various resources and subjects. S/he can also insist on the selection of plays written only by English playwrights because English literature undeniably hosts a large number of renowned playwrights. Great American modern playwrights are acknowledged as the winners of Pulitzer Prize, a United States award for achievements in newspaper and online journalism, literature and musical composition, which presumably ensure the qualities of the their works, but English playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and Harold Pinter have also authored a large number of great plays covering diverse subjects that can fall into different genres. That Harold Pinter won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005 proves the qualities of English playwrights. However, the inclusion of European and American plays should open a wider opportunities in exploring the richness of the world of drama.

Conclusion

In choosing the selection of plays to be discussed in an English drama class, a teacher has the flexibility in deciding to include only English plays written by English playwright, a combination of English plays written by English and non-English playwrights writing in English, or even including those plays that have been translated into English. The emphasis of the English drama class, be it the type, nature and design of drama or even the thematic approach, plays an important role in deciding on the selection of plays to discuss. Therefore, European and American drama can be either inevitability or alternatives in English drama class.

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