

Guide for Class Assignment, for February 4. The Caucasian Chalk Circle, Scene Formal Analysis.

Groups:

1. Prologue: Hunter, Kayla, Gulnara, Colin
2. A Noble Child: Zach D, Ethan, Ashley, Kristen
3. Flight to the Mountains: Alex, Bryn, Katelun
4. In the Mountains: Jayden, Daniel, Nyla, Faith
5. The Story of the Judge: Jazzlyn, Zach H., Olivia, Fai

Part 1: Formal Analysis (use the Guide to the Elements of Literature, found in the Writing + Student Resources section of the course website, as another guide for completing this assignment).

Before class, apart from doing the assigned reading for February 4, go over your group's assigned scene carefully.

First, do a content level analysis. Who are the characters, what happens to them? (plot level analysis).

Next, do a "deep content" or "raw material" analysis. What type of characters are these? With Brecht, characters won't be so much defined by their psychology and interiority, as by the social type that they represent. Only in the development of the play, perhaps, will they come to be defined by their *actions*, and much less by their thoughts or ideas.

As the previous observations imply, to do deep level content analysis, which is in turn a prerequisite for formal analysis, it is important to understand some basic elements of Brecht's aesthetic and drama theory. To do this, I suggest looking again at the Booker reading from Jan. 28. There is also a chapter on the *Chalk Circle* in that same volume as the Booker chapter which might be worth reading. See also the "Writing + Student Resources" section of the website for a list of additional readings that can shed light on Brecht's drama theory and the social, historical, and theoretical context in which he was writing and thinking.

Some questions to ask yourself as you read through your scene:

What is the social context as far as you can determine?

Where do the characters fall into that context?

What is their class status?

How else are they unique in terms of character type (gender, age, etc.)?

As partially discussed in class, Brecht is channeling a mix of genres: fable, grotesque (see Maria Shevtsova's chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, and see Mikhail Bakhtin's classic work of literary analysis, *Rabelais and His World*), Chinese opera and theatre, Japanese Noh theatre (see Fredric Jameson's study, *Brecht and Method*), etc. Therefore, you could almost imagine that his characters are wearing masks that would reflect their "type" and that social status will in part determine character actions: maid, prince, peasant, governor, soldier, and so on. For instance, why is Grusha so free to (eventually) do "the right thing"? Keep in mind that as she runs away with the child, she is essentially momentarily "classless," having lost her employment, or at least she has no immediate material ties or

concerns (apart from personal survival and apart from fulfilling her pending matrimony to the soldier, Simon) that factor into her decisions.

From the dialogue, what can you determine about the character of the different characters, if anything at all? What do we learn about Grusha, for instance, given her actions throughout your scene?

Part of the deep level content analysis means teasing out elements of historical context. As Maria Shevtsova argues in her chapter on the play in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, the structure of this seemingly simple play is actually quite complex, comprised of a nested Russian Dolls type of organization (168). The “real” setting of the play is post-WWII Soviet Union, somewhere in the region of the Caucasus Mountains. Then, we have a singer tell the tale of the *Chalk Circle*, which is a Chinese medieval legend “revised to fit a chapter of Georgia’s medieval history” (Shevtsova 168). Therefore, this play functions as a set of contexts that are implying and overlapping each other: the Soviet Union in the wake of WWII, medieval Eastern Europe, Medieval China. Remember that when we read *Hamlet*, I proposed, based on the analysis offered by Fredric Jameson in *Allegory and Ideology*, that one of the socio-historical raw material that animates Shakespeare’s play is the feudal context of war: the struggle between warring feudal clans and the historical transition to the absolute monarchy that England had been living in the period of the Renaissance and which would eventually sow the seeds of the modern nation state. The problems of succession to the throne, the king’s two bodies (see the study by Ernst Kantorowicz), and so forth, animate the plot, and structure the relations and “systems of emotions” that motivate the character’s actions (for a discussion on systems of emotions, see Jameson’s *Allegory and Ideology*). In the *Chalk Circle*, by contrast, we step deeper into the medieval social framework of lords and peasants, and we witness a territorial ruler (the Duke and his governor) being undermined by the alliance of regional lords (represented by the insurrectionist fat prince). However, here the past is actually commenting on the present, and vice versa. What is Brecht trying to say about modern war, about revolution, about the historical context of the soviet union which is that of the prologue and of the listeners to the singer’s tale?

Once you have carried out a deep content analysis, begin doing formal analysis.

Begin at the macro level by thinking about how some of the classic genres mobilized by Brecht are structured and how they feed into the content (fable, folk son, fable, grotesque, etc.). The fable, like the fairy tale, usually has a framework and a set of stock characters and tropes: a hero who undertakes a journey and overcomes a set of obstacles and villains who might have help from a magical figure or from magic, etc. (For a classic discussion on these tropes, see Northrop Frye’s study, *Anatomy of Criticism*). This is, incidentally, also the framework for many classic video games (think Mario Bros.). And it is no surprise, therefore, that the classic video game is such that the hero faces a set of obstacles that are spatially and temporally presented in a linear chronology. How does the plot of the *Chalk Circle* map into this framework, and how does this genre structure the character interactions?

At the micro-level, you want to look at the syntax, tone, pace, and figurative language used by Brecht.

What you want to try to do is think how the macro and micro levels of form reflect some of the “themes” and deep content elements of the play. For instance, in *Hamlet*, by understanding the feudal context of the play, the problem of succession, the problem of the king’s two bodies, we also begin to understand some of the figural language used to describe Ophelia’s chastity. The language which describes her body as a treasure, then, formally resonates with the changing feudal context in which the

woman's body is seen as nothing more than a vehicle for realizing and transmitting male power alliances from generation to generation. "Tender yourself more dearly or you will tender me a fool." Translation: *Price yourself more highly or you will birth me a bastard*. The legal and commercial language here is also reflective of the changing context of Elizabethan England, when commercial and money-structured social relations are becoming more prevalent, presaging the end of Feudalism and the rise of the nation state and capitalism. However, this is a context in which a person born outside of this system of alliances (the bastard) has no claim to power, and therefore has no fit in the system, therefore linking Ophelia's body to the feudal problem of succession. Therefore, one can argue that the language used by Laertes and Polonius reflects a context in which Ophelia's body must be carefully controlled by her male relatives.

Part 2: How would you stage your scene?

Think about all the elements of a theatre presentation: wardrobe, actors (age, gender, body type, etc.), props, sound, light, video, stage design, acting style, posture, gesture, pacing, dancing, character positioning on the stage, etc.

Brecht, in his postwar performance of *The Chalk Circle* in East Berlin (1954), used a turntable stage to depict Grusha's journey through the mountains (Shevtsova 163). Therefore, he cleverly uses a technical solution to adapt the fable/legend genre to a stage, spatializing the hero's temporal journey in the very structure of the stage scenery.

How would you stage your scene keeping in mind your formal analysis and your understanding of Brecht's drama theory? *How do you exemplify these elements in your staging?* How might you stage the songs that recur throughout the play? Would they be prerecorded or sung live? Why one choice rather than another? Would you use video screens and billboards?

As Jayden mentioned in class, he found the scene where the peasant betrays Grusha and the baby a bit annoying. This is an important observation. It is important to investigate our subjective reactions to a literary scene or element, for these moments are very productive: these moments usually point to something important about a literary text's structure and function. What would we expect in a typical Aristotelian story? We would expect to understand character motivation in a psychological sense. But Brecht is trying to subvert Aristotelian theatre: the peasant woman is more of a character type than an individual. Therefore, her actions, as we discussed in class, might be interpreted as arising less from interior personality characteristics than from external (objective) forces that determine or at least highly influence her actions (and her moral reasoning: is the right thing saving the baby or saving the family farm on which her husband, herself, and perhaps children depend on?). Jayden's understandable annoyance (which I shared on my initial reading of the scene), then, points to this Brechtian attempt to short-circuit traditional Aristotelian poetics. The key question is: how can this scene be staged in order to overcome my or Jayden's annoyance and help us see the peasant's action as rational and perhaps (though not necessarily) justified given the social context and the forces she has to navigate?

If you were to stage this scene, how might you highlight this Brechtian element in order to overcome the modern reader's annoyance at the actions that take place on stage and thus enhance Brecht's point? You could, for instance, have words appear on a billboard that are not on the text itself. For example, you could project the word "livelihood" on a billboard or placard at the exact moment the peasant

woman betrays Grusha to the soldiers, highlighting the fact that the peasant's decision is motivated by her imperative to survive over her imperative to help Grusha and the baby.

For a cinematic example of how to adapt Brechtian techniques to a visual language, see for instance the great Jean-Luc Godard noir-science fiction film *Alphaville* (1965). How is sound used in this film? Music? Film Editing? Generic tropes?

Works Cited:

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Shevtsova, Maria. "The Caucasian Chalk Circle: the view from Europe." *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, edited by Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 160 – 174.