

THE EXPLODING ROSE

The Art of the Short Play

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Lorca said “a play is a poem standing up.” He might have been referring in particular to the one-act play.

Think of a one-act and you’re probably thinking of something short and sharp, a punch in the nose, the rug pulled out from under you. You probably picture a small, bare, black-box stage with just a park bench or a table and chair for a set. One or two people. Minimal props. One-acts are necessarily stripped down in production, and this goes to the heart of the nature of one-acts themselves. They are *elemental*.

The long play, like the symphony, luxuriates in development and recapitulation. The one-act has no time for that. Try to develop the plot of a one-act and you look melodramatic. Try to develop the characters and you look like you’re not doing them justice. A brisk masterpiece like Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter* would be tedious if stretched over two hours. A full-length play is a four-ton, cast steel, Richard Serra ellipse that you can walk around in; a one-act is a piece of string pasted by Richard Tuttle onto a gallery wall for minimalist contemplation. A full-length play carpetbombs its subject; a one-act play is an exploding rose in the hand of a lone assassin.

We see a lot of intermissionless 90-minute plays these days. That’s not the kind of play I’m talking about. They’re so long that the shortness and sharpness, the *one-act effect*, has time to dissipate. Nor am I talking about skits.

What's the difference between a one-act and a skit? First, just to be clear: a "skit" is not defined by length. There are two-hour stage works that are skits and five-minute stage works that are not. If the nine-minute comedy you're laughing at makes you catch your breath with a sudden searing glimpse of human pain; if it drops an ambiguity in your lap that makes you hesitate a moment before you applaud; if it plants an image that you can't shake a day later and its language rises above the mundane, then you're looking not at a skit but at a play. A skit is to a play as a peck on the cheek is to a French kiss. A peck, you can shrug off; a tongue, you have to deal with.

Samuel Beckett with *Not I* created perhaps the quintessential one-act with a single, speaking, spotlighted mouth babbling out a painful story at top speed to a hooded, silent figure. In Thornton Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner*, decades of a family are packed into fifteen minutes. One-acts are like that. You can compress whole generations into them. Briefly mortal, they carry the implicit moral *Life is short, just like this play*. With its concision, a good one-act instantly attains the lapidary urgency of a death-bed wish.

If you go to the shelves looking for one-acts, you'll notice that, before about 1930, there aren't many of them. You may find a few lightweight vaudevilles or curtain-raisers, but nothing adventurous or substantial until O'Neill's early short works. Nothing, in other words, that's a *play*. Why so?

It can't be a coincidence that the lonely one-act arose in a lonely century when mass warfare was reduced to the use of one, small, unspeakable bomb; when journeys between continents were reduced to two bad meals and a nap; when a symphony orchestra was shrunk down far enough to fit into the gadget in the palm of your hand; when time was shown to be

flexible and the space within an atom more infinite than Blake ever imagined in his grain of sand. The 20th century was an era of compression, of reduction to essentials.

It was also the century of modernism and existentialism, and the one-act is a quintessential modernist, existential form, born of the same anxieties and interests that created cubism, expressionism, minimalism, twelve-tone music, Martha Graham's dances and Balanchine's leotard ballets. All of those are attempts to reach some naked, simple, essential statement in a compressed gesture or image. "Modernism," wrote the historian Norman Kantor, "essentially was a rejection of the 19th century emphasis on the big, the general and the simplified in favor of the 20th-century focus on the small, the particular, and the difficult."

Every line a writer writes is an invitation to immortality. This is even truer in a form where every word, every syllable, every breath counts. "*Load every rift of your subject with ore,*" the dying Keats advised Shelley. I have no doubt he would have made a fine writer of one-acts, had he lived.

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