

Kačer, Tomáš

### **The new messenger's applications: a conclusion**

In: Kačer, Tomáš. *New messengers : short narratives in plays by Michael Frayn, Tom Stoppard and August Wilson*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2013, pp. 125-128

ISBN 9788021063396

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129067>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

## 14 ► The New Messenger's Applications: a Conclusion

The new messenger has been introduced as a specific type of dramatic character with specific qualities. This introduction of the character-type followed from an argument based upon numerous sources. In the first place, there is the messenger in its traditional form, which has been described and illustrated using examples from the history of drama, namely in the case studies of *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, *Antony and Cleopatra* by Shakespeare, and *The Glass Menagerie* by Williams. As a successor of this conventional type of character, the new messenger has been attributed its name as well as a basic function within the development of a play's story, which is to push the action forward. The structural view of drama, which helped to identify the new messenger and its roles within the framework of a play, capitalises on the findings of the Prague School, and on their observations concerning the aesthetic function of language. The idea that the new messenger is a type of a conventional character is based on the line of thought grounded in the narrative grammar and its approaches to the structure of dramatic works. Last but not least, the fact that Brecht's theatre has changed the understanding of how a convention works in a play lead to the notion that a transformation of the convention of the messenger was necessary, which gave way to an appearance of a new type of character, the *new messenger*.

The case studies of various applications of this character-type showed how it is used in a selection of contemporary mainstream dramas by Frayn, Stoppard, and Wilson. The choice of these dramatists and their plays has been explained in one of the opening chapters of the present book, and it has proven illustrative in the variety of material it offers for analysis. The numerous instances of new messengers in action support the main argument of the present book about the existence of the new messenger as a character type, as well as its specific properties. However, the analysed material allowed us to do more than that. It shows that the new messenger is used in several ways, which can be distinguished accordingly.

The first application of the new messenger is dealt with in Chapter 11 "Pushing the Action Forward". This role of the new messenger, when it becomes the propeller of action, is shared with the conventional traditional messenger. As the examples from

*Democracy* and *Arcadia* show, characters of the plays assume the role of the new messenger to announce new facts from outside the on-stage action to give it a new impulse and thus steer the action in another direction. In *Democracy*, Kretschmann's reports from East Germany have influence on Guillaume's espionage career in the West German Chancellery. Set within an all-male staff of the Chancellor's office, the storyline turns towards Guillaume's inevitable disclosure and motivates his actions. In *Arcadia*, Hannah's report of her discovery of the garden book, which explains Ezra Chater's death, shatters Bernard's hope for a ground-breaking discovery in the history of literature and turns an academic hero into a loser.

When pushing the action forward, there are also several other uses of the new messenger when viewed as a type, which are covered in the sections dealing with the voice from the gadget. In *Democracy*, Ehmke lends his voice to a newspaper and the report he reads out loud contributes to the Chancellor Willy Brandt's fall. When the creeping and crawling of Sutter's ghost is heard from the attic in *The Piano Lesson*, the family learns that the time has come to deal with the slave past. Moreover, the music of the piano brings harmony to the family's life. Although it lacks a voice, its sound is capable of exorcizing Sutter's ghost and evoke their ancestors' spirits to come to terms with them. These examples illustrate that the role of the new messenger is not strictly limited to human characters, but can also be assumed by various "gadgets", which can or cannot speak. These gadgets then speak with their own voice, with a borrowed one, or even with the sound of music.

In the case of pushing the action forward, the convention of the messenger has gone through the transformation as far as the character is concerned, but the role has remained comparable. The new messenger is no longer a separate character. Various other characters can assume its function. They are main characters, supporting characters, as well as specific props, which, for the most part, play their own specific roles within the development of the action, only assuming the messenger's role temporarily, when a push forward of the action is structurally necessary.

Chapter 12 "Interpreting for Others" focuses on the new messenger as an interpreter of facts and events that take place outside the frame of on-stage action. It is in this use of the new messenger, where the Brechtian tradition has fully separated the new type from its conventional predecessor. It is in cases of reports of extrafictional facts and events in particular, that the new messenger becomes an interpreter. By a selection of facts and the context of the delivery, it gives historical and political commentaries that shape the audience's understanding of the given topic. The new messenger thus becomes a political agent when interpreting facts and events for others – other characters and the audience alike.

Wagner of *Night and Day* has a privileged access to information about the civil war, as he is a reporter. Although his reports are fictional, his framing serves as an interpretation of the journalistic work as such, including personal involvement and story-hunt. Through his reports, he opens the arena for a political discussion that aims at the audience's actual world, rather than the world of the fictional action. A succession of three

studies of plays by Wilson show how the status of an eye-witness is important for the character when it assumes the role of the new messenger. Troy of *Fences*, Memphis of *Two Trains Running* and Booster of *Jitney* are all representatives of characters that have the power to revive the past when they report about it, because they witnessed and experienced what they now recount. They are not mere mediators of facts and events, they are a part of them.

These case studies show that the use of the new messenger is a powerful tool for making a political statement in a historical way, as is the case of the whole of Wilson's *The Twentieth Century Cycle*, where these plays belong. Wilson's plays send out a clear political message about the suffering and discrimination of African Americans. By retelling the stories from the past, it becomes obvious that the reconciliation with the slave past and racial discrimination has remained a pressing issue in the American society. And it is Wilson's *Cycle*, that becomes a part of the healing process.

Frayn's and Stoppard's plays do not have such a unified purpose, even when they are political or political-historical. As the case studies show, the topics of these plays differ and so do the appeals, making their production more universal. The chapter on the new messengers as political agents covers this diversity of topics that belong to the political arena in the sense that they present an interpretation of history and society to the audience, often doing so through new messengers' reports. Thus, *Alphabetical Order* gives the impression of a comedy about a helpless world, where any attempt at organizing fails, or a memento of a world that is ruled by strict categories and order. Reinhardt of *Afterlife* is watching his world fall apart, when he is made to leave Austria as a Jew on the eve of the Nazi *Anschluss*. Jan turns from a supporter of the "Socialism with a Human Face" after he testifies about the Communist Czechoslovak regime's actions against a rock band, and he becomes a dissident. His reports in *Rock'n'Roll* further stress the hopeless atmosphere in the country in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

Although these plays by Wilson and by Frayn and Stoppard are seen as political-historical plays, based upon the above, it is evident that while Wilson's plays aim at a political interpretation that affects the present take on the topics of the plays (racism, discrimination, reconciliation with the past, and so on), Frayn's and Stoppard's plays found a larger-scale political commentary about the nature of oppression and totalitarianism or, their counterparts, revolutionary changes.

Chapter 13 "Informing (about) the Actual World" identifies the new messenger as a teaching agent. The provided analyses show how the use of this character-type effectively reaches out to the extrafictional, actual world of the audience. In these plays, the interference of the actual with the fictional world is even more striking than in the case of the historical plays, where the function of referring to historical events was to present them while interpreting, and shaping them. This last part describes how the new messenger makes extrafictional content a part of the fictional world, while preserving the informational quality of his news, which is relevant to the actual world.

Such is the case with the so-called science plays, where an explication of a scientific theory forms an important part of the play's narrative and structure. Kerner of *Hapgood*

is a scientist and his lectures about quantum physics, on the one hand, explain some of the plot-constructing features of the play, but on the other, teach the audience about them. Bohr and Heisenberg of *Copenhagen* are fictional representations of the physicists, and they present their original theories, such as the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, complementarity and uncertainty. While there are moments in each of the plays that serve as on-stage metaphors of the scientific concepts, the scientists as characters also give lectures (report) on their fields and, as such, function as teaching agents for the audience. In this sense, this application is a return to one of the oldest aims of drama, which is the educational role.

*The Coast of Utopia* is also a case of a series of lectures, this time in the history of philosophy, namely German Idealism. While the characters try (and fail) to live up to the teaching of the particular philosopher's idea which they support at a given moment, now and then they switch the mode of their discourse, leave the dramatic dialogue, and switch into a narrative mode and give an overview of the philosophy. At these moments they are the new messengers and what they bring are facts and knowledge.