

Drama

So far we have identified distinct features belonging to fiction and poetry, two genres which rely on the written or spoken word as their primary means of expression. The dramatic or performing arts, however, combine the verbal with a number of non-verbal or visual means, including stage, scenery, shifting of scenes, facial expressions, gestures, make-up, props, and lighting. This emphasis is also reflected in the word **drama** itself, which derives from the Greek "draîn" ("to do," "to act"), thereby referring to a performance or representation by actors.

Drama has its roots in cultic-ritual practice. Ancient tragedies and comedies were performed (fifth century BC) during festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine. While drama was one of the main genres in classical antiquity, its importance waned with the dawning of the Middle Ages. After the turn of the millennium, however, simple forms of drama re-emerged. In **mystery** and **miracle plays**, religious, allegorical, or biblical themes were adapted from Christian liturgy and dramatized for performance in front of churches and in the yards of inns (Medieval Drama).

What is drama?

A dictionary definition will state that: "Drama is something intended specifically for performance on stage in front of an audience."

Drama is a literary genre and an art form that tells a story through the speech and actions of the characters in the story. Most drama is performed by actors who impersonate the characters before an audience in a theatre.

Although drama is a form of literature, it differs from other literary forms in the way it is presented. For example, a novel also tells a story involving characters. But a novel tells its story through a combination of dialogue and narrative, and is complete on the printed page. Most drama achieves its greatest effect when it is performed. Some critics believe that a written script is not really a play until it has been acted before an audience.

In drama, the playwright can organize human experience into understandable patterns. The audience sees the material of real life presented in meaningful form-with the unimportant omitted and the significant emphasized.

No one knows exactly how or when drama began, but nearly every civilization has had some form of it. Drama may be developed from ancient religious ceremonies that were performed to win favour from the gods. In these ceremonies, priests often impersonated supernatural beings or animals, and sometimes imitated such actions as hunting. Stories grew up around some rites and lasted after the rites themselves had died out. These myths may have formed the basis of drama.

Another theory suggests that drama originated in choral hymns of praise sung at the tomb of a dead hero. At some point, a speaker separated from the chorus and began to act out deeds in the hero's life. This acted part gradually became more elaborate, and the role of the chorus diminished. Eventually, the stories were performed as plays, their origins forgotten.

According to a third theory, drama grew out of a natural love of storytelling. Stories told around campfires re-created victories in the hunt or in battle, or the feats of dead heroes. These stories developed into dramatic retellings of the events.

Making the script Visual

It is important, then, that you are aware that in approaching a play you are dealing with a work that is very different from a novel; therefore, you will need quite different strategies to handle it. You must be able to visualize the play on the stage of your mind-to be able to bring the play alive in your head and see and hear the action as if you were in a theatre. Here are some clues to try and achieve this:

- ✓ Recognize that reading a play is essentially a group activity and so work with others whenever it is possible.
- ✓ Go and see plays performed as often as possible.
- ✓ Keep a notebook of plays that you see noting your responses-thoughts and feelings, impressions about performances and ideas on production.
- ✓ Take parts in 'acting out' parts of a play, this will help you appreciate aspects of the play that straight reading alone can never do.
- ✓ Listen to audio tapes or videos of plays. These do not replace seeing plays but help give an insight to the action and characters and other features of the play.

Aspects of the play:

With these key notions in mind, let us consider some aspects of plays that are essential to examine in dramatic texts.

1-Opening scenes *prologue*

The way that a play opens is crucial to engaging the audience's attention and writers can take many options depending on the effects they wish to achieve. Looking closely at the opening scene is important for many reasons.

First of all, it constitutes the window through which you have a first crucial glance into the world of the play. When reading a text, you are somehow confronted with the 'unseen' and there are some questions worth asking. The central questions are: 'what effect does the writer want this scene to have on the audience?' and 'what purpose does this serve to the play as a whole?'

*Here are some possible answers to these questions:

- ✓ The scene provides an explanation of the plot so far, background information and details the audience need to understand what is going on. (This is sometimes called **exposition**).
- ✓ The scene creates a setting or background against which the scene is set.
- ✓ The scene creates a mood or creates tension which captures the audience's attention immediately (The opening scene of *Hamlet* is a good example of this).

✓ The scene introduces characters, situations and relationships

✓ The scene provokes a sense of intrigue which captures the audience's attention and makes them want to know more.

2- Presenting characters:

Let us first begin with conventional definitions of character and characterization:

-Characters: are the invented, imaginary figures in a dramatic or narrative work, which are given human qualities and behaviour. We learn about them through dialogue, action and description.

-Characterisation: The way in which a writer creates his characters in a narrative or play so as to attract or repel his audience. The varieties of characters presented in literature are as numerous as those of the real people that surround us in the world; but different kinds of literature have certain conventions of characterisation. There are many different methods of characterisation as there are ways of telling a story.

A key element in the presentation of character in drama is the extent to which the playwright achieves a convincing sense of character. However, the nature of drama is such that the playwright employs very different methods of characterisation to those employed by a novelist. Novelists can provide the reader with as much background information as they wish, they can enter the minds of characters, let their readers know what characters think, feel, are

planning to do. A playwright does not have all these options and must subsequently use different methods. One of the most conventional way in which a playwright defines character is through detailed and explicit stage directions. So it is important when reading a play to pay close attention to this kind of information. When watching a play on the stage, you will not be reading stage directions but seeing them in performance.

Some playwrights give a great deal of information through their description of how characters are meant to appear. Look carefully at this description from the opening of John Galsworthy's *Strife*, for example:

Strife

Act I

(It is noon, in the Underwood's' dining room a bright fire is burning. On one side of the fireplace are double doors leading to the drawing room, on the other side a door leading to the hall. In the centre of the room a long dining table without cloth is set out as a board table. At the head of it in the Chairman's seat, sits John Anthony, an old man, big, clean shaven, and highcoloured, with thick white hair and thick dark eyebrows. His movements are rather slow and feeble, but his eyes are very much alive. There is a glass of water by his side. On his right sits hisson, Edgar, an earnest-looking man of thirty, reading a newspaper. Next to him, Wanklin, a man with jutting eyebrows, and silver-streaked light hair, is bending over transfer papers.

Tench, the secretary, a short and rather humble, nervous man, with side whiskers, stands helping him. On Wanklin's right sits Underwood, the Manager, a quiet man, with a long stiff jaw, and steady eyes. Back to the fire is Scantlebury, a very large, pale, sleepy man, with grey hair, rather bald. Between him and the chairman are two empty chairs.)

Wildier: (Who is lean, cadaverous, and complaining, with drooping grey moustaches, stands before the fire) I say, this fire's is the devil.

3-Asides and Soliloquies:

While the novelist relies essentially on description and narrative techniques to reveal a character's inner thoughts and feelings, the dramatist employs other dramatic conventions to achieve these effects. Among these are asides and soliloquies which are to provide some insight into characters' minds.

* **Aside:**

An aside is a dramatic convention in which a character speaks in such a way that some of the characters on stage do not hear what he says while others do. It may also be a direct address to the audience, revealing the character's views, thoughts, feelings, motives and intentions.

The **aside** is a kind of 'stage whisper'. Asides tend to be short, often single sentence and sometimes just one word. They are used by the playwright to convey small pieces of information concerning the plot or character to the audience.

*The Soliloquy:

A soliloquy is a speech which a character in a play makes when he or she is alone on the stage. There are two ways of writing or acting soliloquies. The first approach is for the character to speak his or her thoughts aloud, ignoring the presence of the audience. This is usually referred to as a *private soliloquy*. The second approach is for the character to speak directly to the audience. This is known as a *public soliloquy*.

Soliloquies are frequently used at some crucial moment in the play when a character is undergoing some kind of emotionally or psychologically heightened experience. For example, when a character is distressed or suffering some kind of confusion of mind or alternatively when a character is feeling overwhelmed or wants to clarify their own thoughts and feelings. Let us take for the sake of illustration a soliloquy from Marlowe's character Doctor Faustus. Doctor Faustus sold his soul to the devil in return for knowledge and power. He is now waiting for the devil to come and take his soul to hell. It is a moment of great confusion and agony. Twenty four years of power on earth are over and now he has just an hour left to live.

Doctor Faustus (1588) by Christopher Marlowe (Act V)

FAUST: Ah, Faustus,
Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,
And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of Heaven,
That time may cease, and midnight never come;
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again and make
Perpetual day, or let this hour be but
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,
That Faustus may repent and save his soul!
O lente, lente, currite noctis equi!
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The Devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.
O, I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?

4-Issues and themes:

Studying drama implies being able to identify the issues and themes that the playwright explores in the play. Such ideas can usually be presented to the audience in two key ways:

- First, we can detect ideas, issues, thoughts, etc. expressed by the actual characters in a play.
- Secondly we can detect themes and ideas that the playwright wants the play as a whole project to convey.

Sometimes a playwright will have **major** characters hold views or follow a philosophy that ultimately is shown to counter the message that the play as a whole conveys.

5- Plot and structure

*Plot:

The plan of a literary work, or the arrangement of events in drama and novels. The whole notion of plot and its development is bound up with the way the play is put together, with its structure. The creation of an order or pattern needs careful planning and the playwright needs to consider a number of factors.

Briefly stated an effective plot should:

- * maintain the interest of the audience from beginning to end.
- * move the action on from one episode to the next.
- * arouse interest of the audience in character and situation.
- * create expectation and surprise.

Usually the structure of a play follows a basic pattern which consists of identifiable elements:

- 1- **Exposition:** This opens the play and often introduces the main characters and provides background information.
- 2- **Dramatic Incitement:** the incident which provides the starting point for the main action of the play.
- 3- **Complication:** This usually forms the main action of the play in which the characters respond to the dramatic incitement and other developments that stem from it.
- 4- **Crisis:** the climax of the play.
- 5- **Resolution:** this is the final section of the play where things are worked out and some kind of conclusion is reached.

Activity:

Examine carefully the structure of a play that you are studying. Draw a diagram to represent the way that the play develops, making brief notes of key moments.

NB:

Shakespeare usually follows the pattern of a pyramidal structure in the development of his plot. Act I and II serve to gather the events, raise tension through conflicts between characters over some issue. The climax is generally

reversing the course of the play. From that moment onwards there is a shift of direction of the whole play, with the tension beginning gradually to fall down in Acts IV and V leading the play to its resolution or denouement.

*** The Five-Act structure of Hamlet:**

ACT I: EXPOSITION. The rotten state of Denmark is disclosed, and the ghost appears with his call for vengeance.

ACT II: RISING ACTION. Hamlet tries to discover the truth about the ghost's accusations.

ACT III: CLIMAX. Hamlet springs his "mousetrap" and catches his proof-Claudius is guilty.

ACT IV: FALLING ACTION. Claudius, not Hamlet, takes charge of events.

ACT V: CATASTROPHE. The consummation of everyone's vengeance is achieved in a bloody ending that leaves only Horatio alive to tell the tale.

*** Structure:**

The structure of a play is integral to the way in which the playwright shapes the central issues that are developed. In this respect it can be viewed in two ways. What is sometimes called the **dynamic structure** of the play consists of the sequence of events which build up in a 'cause and effect' fashion to create the plot of the play and so drives the play forward. Underlying this obvious structure, though, it is often possible to detect another that is less obvious but just as important.

The second structure is revealed through various parallels and cross-references or repeated images, symbols, or language that create a kind of network of threads that run through the play. This kind of structure is sometimes called the **symmetric structure** and it can exert a powerful influence on the overall effect of the play.

* consider the following example (Hamlet's famous soliloquy):

Ham. To be, or not to be- that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them. To die- to sleep-

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd. To die-

Studying the text:

Here are some useful guidelines that will help you formulate and develop your own critical response to the play you are studying and fulfill some pedagogical requirements.

- ✓ Think about the characters- look at key speeches, look for shifts in focus, different ways in interpreting what they do and say.
- ✓ Look for various possible 'meanings' and 'patterns' in the play.
- ✓ Consider how/if the theatrical effects are indicated.
- ✓ Think about the pace and the variety of the action.
- ✓ Think about the overall shape and structure of the play and the impact that this could have on an audience.
- ✓ Consider the particular characteristics and qualities of the play and how together they present a whole.
- ✓ Apply the broader knowledge you have about the nature of plays and drama.

FORMS OF DRAMA:

Among the many forms of Western drama are: (1) tragedy, (2) serious drama, (3) melodrama, and (4) comedy. Many plays combine forms. Modern dramatists often disregard these categories and create new forms.

Tragedy maintains a mood that emphasizes the play's serious intention, though there may be moments of comic relief. Such plays feature a tragic hero, an exceptional yet flawed individual who is brought to disaster and usually death. The hero's fate raises questions about the meaning of existence, the nature of fate, morality, and social or psychological relationships. Aristotle identified the emotional effect of tragedy as the "catharsis [emotional release] of pity and fear."

Serious drama, which developed out of tragedy, became established in the 1800's. It shares the serious tone and often the serious purpose of tragedy and like tragedy, it concentrates on unhappy events. But serious drama can end Happily, and its heroes are less imposing and more ordinary than the tragic hero. Serious drama is sometimes viewed as tragedy's modern successor.

Melodrama involves a villain who initiates actions that threaten characters with whom the audience is sympathetic. Its situations are extreme and often violent, though endings are frequently happy. Melodrama portrays a world in which good and evil are clearly distinguished. As a result, almost all Melodramas have a sharply defined, oversimplified moral conflict.

Comedy tries to evoke laughter, often by exposing the pretensions of fools and rascals. Comedy usually ends happily. But even in the midst of laughter, comedy can raise surprisingly serious questions. Comedy can be both critical and playful, and it may arouse various responses.

Farce is sometimes considered a distinct dramatic form, but it is essentially a type of comedy. Farce uses ridiculous situations and broad physical clowning for its humorous effects.

Review of Shakespeare's forms of drama:

Shakespeare has always held a dominant position as far as the drama element of English literature syllabuses is concerned. So it would be useful to introduce a brief introduction to his drama as many of his plays constitute set texts for study at schools and universities. Shakespeare wrote different types of plays and many labels are used to describe them. Let us take a simple method to categorize them. Broadly speaking we can divide them into **Histories**, **Tragedies**, and **Comedies**. The most famous of them are as follows:

<u>Histories</u>		<u>Comedies</u>	
Richard II		<i>The Taming of the shrew</i>	
Henry IV' (Part I and Part II)		<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	
Henry V		<i>A midsummer Night's Dream</i>	
Antony and Cleopatra		<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	
Julius Caesar		<i>The merchant of Venice</i>	
<u>Tragedies</u>			
<i>Hamlet</i>			
<i>Macbeth</i>			
<i>Othello</i>			
<i>King Lear</i>			
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>			

Moreover, there are two further categories for a few of his plays that do not fit easily into the three broad genres:

<u>The Problem Comedies</u>		<u>The Romances</u>	
<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>		<i>Cymbeline</i>	
<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>		<i>Winter's Tale</i>	
<i>Measure for measure</i>		<i>The Tempest</i>	

Let us now have a closer look at some of the features of plays in each of these categories.

The Histories

It appears that Shakespeare was the first dramatist to write a real history play and to treat his material as a dramatist rather than a chronicler of events. His development of character and ideas and themes in these plays make them far more than simple chronicles as he adapts historical fact to suit his dramatic purpose.

The Tragedies

The idea of disorder also lies at the heart of the tragedies. The four plays that are regarded as 'the great tragedies' are *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. Each of these plays focuses on a central character after whom the play is named and the action revolves essentially around this character. However, other characters are involved too and often several innocent victims are claimed before the play reaches its end.

NB:

This purging of emotions which affects the audience at the end of the tragedy is referred to as **catharsis**.

The Comedies

The term 'comedy' in modern usage tends to make us think of something fairly lightweight that makes us laugh. However in its original sense, and certainly as applied to Shakespeare's plays, the term simply means a play that has a happy ending: the action that leads to this ending may be funny and light in tone but equally it could deal with issues that are just as serious as those raised in other kinds of plays.

The Problem Comedies

Generally the Problem Comedies are taken to be *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. In many of these plays fall somewhere between tragedy and comedy but avoid being tragic because the end 'happily', a least in so far as no one dies at the of the play. They are also known as Problem plays or Dark comedies.

The Romance Plays

Once again we see the idea of disorder presented through the Romance Plays or Las Plays, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Unlike the Problem Comedies, which have a coldly realistic setting, these plays make much more use of fantasy elements and magic to explore the central ideas. They operate in make believe worlds and the plots often take improbable or incredible turns and twists.