

An Introduction to Drama

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1- The Nature of Drama

Drama may be defined as **a mode of storytelling enacted by live performers before an audience. The Greek root of the word drama literally means "action happening before the eyes."** In this sense, the drama differs from fiction in that the plot, characters, and setting must all be conveyed to the audience with the limitations of space and time inherent in this form.

While a novel may stretch its plot across a nearly infinite length of time or pages and fill its story with as many characters as necessary, a play must simplify its structure to be enjoyed and understood within an audience's practical attention span and within the limited resources of a particular physical space. Because of these constraints placed upon the playwright, drama was prized as one of the highest forms of art by the Ancient Greeks.

From this classical heritage, drama has been an important form of popular entertainment, religious ritual, social commentary, and creative expression down to the present day. Even in our modern age, with the proliferation of technology and amusement, contemporary audiences still respond to the immediacy and intimacy of live performers engaged in action unfolding in front of them. While its form has changed over time, the basic elements of the drama have remained since the Greeks.

2- Types of Drama

Drama is a major literary Genre, frequently subdivided into the categories of Tragedy, Comedy, and Tragicomedy. Further subdivisions include Melodrama and Farce.

- **Tragedy** is broadly applied to literary, and especially to dramatic, representations of serious actions which eventuate in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist (the main character). Tragedy is fundamentally a serious play in which the tragic hero faces problems and obstacles but cannot hope to overcome them and ultimately, he is defeated.
- **Comedy** is a type of drama that celebrates or satirizes the follies of characters. In the most common literary application, a comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters.
- **Tragicomedy** is a play that generally incorporates both tragic and comic elements. It represents a serious action which threatens a tragic disaster to the protagonist, yet, by an abrupt reversal of circumstance, turns out happily. The name "tragicomedy" is sometimes also applied more loosely to plays with double plots, one serious and the other comic.
- **Melodrama** is a type of drama that highlights suspense and romantic sentiment, with characters who are usually either clearly good or bad. As its name implies, the form frequently uses a musical background to underscore or heighten the emotional tone of a scene.
- **Farce** is a type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter in the parlance of the theatre. To do so it commonly employs highly exaggerated or caricatured types of characters, puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations, and often makes free use of sexual mix-ups, broad verbal humor, and physical bustle and horseplay.

3- The Elements of Drama

Aristotle outlined the most basic elements that comprise any narrative, and any study of literature must begin with his list. The most important elements are:

Plot

Plot is the plan, design, scheme or pattern of events and further, the organization of incident and character in such a way as to induce curiosity and suspense in the spectator or reader. An ideal plot encompasses the following sequential levels: exposition-complication-resolution.

A typical plot consists of a tripartite (three-part) action structure: rising action, climax, and falling action. **The rising action** of a work consists of the main character's attempts to overcome whatever obstacles stand in his or her way. This struggle usually results in the greatest dramatic moment of the story, **the climax**. After this climax follows the story's **falling action**, also called the denouement. The engine that drives this entire plot structure is conflict. **Conflict** may be internal (a man against himself) or external (a man against another man, society, nature, etc.) Stories may contain several different conflicts of internal or external natures. The main purpose of such conflict is to create **a sense of suspense** in the reader to foster continued interest in the narrative. This structure may also be referred to as the obstacle-anxiety-relief cycle.

In many cases, **flashback** and **foreshadowing** introduce information concerning the past or future into the narrative. Flashback is a change in the temporal sequence of the story so that it moves back to show events that took place earlier than those already shown. Occasionally the flashback will involve a return to a scene that the audience has already witnessed. This type of flashback may be repeated a number of times, each time acquiring added significance as the plot progresses. Foreshadowing, on the other hand, is information presented in an earlier part of the story to make us accept as probable an event that takes place later on in the narrative.

Setting

Setting is the where (place) and when (time), and by extension, the social and political context of the action. The role that setting plays in a story and its overall significance in forming an understanding of the work varies greatly. Some stories are particular to a time and place, while others could be set against almost any backdrop.

Character

Character is a person or individual in the drama that may have defined personal qualities and/or histories. **Flat characters** (or two-dimensional characters) demonstrate a lack of depth or change in the course of a drama event. **Rounded characters** (or three-dimensional characters) feature more elaborate and complex traits and histories and are changed by dramatic action in the drama event.

Theme

A theme is what the story is truly about at its core. It is often the lesson or moral we are meant to take away from this particular story. Plot and narrative are vehicles that drive the reader or viewer to the theme in a story.

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Act II – Scene II

Macbeth. Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast,—

Lady Macbeth. What do you mean?

Macbeth. Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house:

'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

Lady Macbeth. Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane,

You do unbend your noble strength, to think
So brainsickly of things. Go get some water,
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.
Why did you bring these daggers from the place?
They must lie there: go carry them; and smear
The sleepy grooms with blood.

Macbeth. I'll go no more:

I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again I dare not.

Lady Macbeth. Infirm of purpose!

Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal;
For it must seem their guilt.