

General Introduction to Drama

1. Definition of drama

Drama(δρᾶμα) comes from a Greek word, δράω, drao, meaning "to do" or "to act." A play is a story acted out. It shows people going through some eventful period in their lives, seriously or humorously. The speech and action of a play recreate the flow of human life. A play comes fully to life only on the stage. On the stage it combines many arts those of the **author, director, actor, designer, and others**. Dramatic performance involves an intricate process of rehearsal based upon imagery inherent in the dramatic text. A **playwright** first invents a drama out of mental imagery. The dramatic text presents the drama as a range of verbal imagery. The language of drama can range between great extremes: on the one hand, an intensely theatrical and ritualistic manner; and on the other, an almost exact reproduction of real life. A **dramatic monologue** is a type of lyrical poem or narrative piece that has a person speaking to a select listener and revealing his character in a dramatic situation.

2. Classification of Dramatic Plays

In a strict sense, plays are classified as being either **tragedies or comedies**. The broad difference between the two is in the **ending**. Comedies end happily. Tragedies end on an unhappy note. The tragedy acts as a **purge**. It arouses our pity for the stricken one and our terror that we ourselves may be struck down. As the play closes we are washed clean of these emotions and we feel better for the experience. A classical tragedy tells of a high and noble person who falls because of a "**tragic flaw**," a weakness in his own character. A domestic tragedy concerns the lives of ordinary people brought low by circumstances beyond their control. Domestic tragedy may be realistic seemingly true to life or naturalistic realistic and on the seamy side of life. A **romantic comedy is a love story**. The main characters are lovers; the secondary characters are comic. In the end the lovers are always united. **Farce** is comedy at its broadest. Much fun and horseplay enliven the action. The **comedy of manners**, or artificial comedy, is subtle, witty, and often mocking. **Sentimental comedy** mixes sentimental emotion with its humor. **Melodrama** has a plot filled with pathos and menacing threats by a villain, but it does include comic relief and has a happy ending. It depends upon physical action rather than upon character probing. Tragic or comic, the action of the play comes from **conflict of characters** how the stage people react to each other. These reactions make the play. (<http://litera1no4.tripod.com/drama.html>)

3. Elements of Drama

1) Character

Most simply a character is one of the persons who appear in the play, one of the **dramatis personae** (literally, the persons of the play). In another sense of the term, the treatment of the character is the basic part of the playwright's work. Conventions of the period and the author's personal vision will affect the treatment of character.

Most plays contain **major characters and minor characters**. The delineation and development of major characters is essential to the play; the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius depends upon the character of each. A minor character like Marcellus, a sentry, serves a specific function, to inform Hamlet of the appearance of his father's ghost. Once, that is done, he can depart in peace, for we need not know what sort of person he is or what happens to him. The distinction between major and minor characters is one of degree, as the character of Horatio might illustrate.

Another common term in drama is **protagonist**. Etymologically, it has two parts: **proto** (first or primary) and **agonist** (one who is engaged in a struggle), and the word means the first contestant. In the Greek drama, where the term arose, all the parts were played by one, two, or three actors (the more actors, the later the play), and the best actor, who got the principal part(s), was the **protagonist**. The second best actor was called the **deuteragonist**; third, the **tritagonist**. Ideally, the term "protagonist" should be used only for the principal character. Several other characters can be defined by their relation to the protagonist. The **antagonist** is his principal rival in the conflict set forth in the play. A **foil** is a character who defines certain characteristics in the protagonist by exhibiting opposite traits or the same traits in a greater or lesser degree. A **confidant(e)** provides a ready ear to which the protagonist can address certain remarks which should be heard by the audience but not by the other characters. In *Hamlet*, for example, Hamlet is the protagonist, Claudius the antagonist, Laertes and Fortinbras, foils (observe the way in which each goes about avenging the death or loss of property of his father), and Horatio, the confidant.

Another type of character is the stereotype or stock character, a character who reappears in various forms in many plays. Comedy is particularly a fruitful source of such figures, including the **braggart** or boastful soldier (a man who claims great valor but proves to be a coward when tested), the irascible old man (the source of elements in the character of Polonius), the witty servant, the coquette, the prude, the fop, and others. A stock character from another genre is the revenger of Renaissance tragedy. The role of Hamlet demonstrates how such a stereotype is modified by an author to create a great role, combining the stock elements with individual ones.

A group of actors who function as a unit, called a **chorus**, was a characteristic feature of the Greek tragedy. The members of the chorus shared a common identity, such as old men of Thebes. **The choragos** (leader of the chorus) sometimes spoke and acted separately as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In some of the plays, the chorus participated directly in the action; in others they were restricted to observing the action and commenting on it. The chorus also separated the individual sins by singing and dancing choral odes, though just what the singing and dancing were like is uncertain. The odes were in strict metrical patterns; sometimes they were direct comments on the action and characters, and at other times they were more general statements and judgments. A chorus in Greek fashion is not common in later plays, although there are instances such as T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, in which the Women of Canterbury serve as a chorus.

On occasion a single actor may perform the function of a chorus, as do the aptly named Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Alfieri in the *View from the Bridge* functions both as a chorus and a minor character in the action of the play.

Reference: *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (Combined Shorter Edition) Edited by Carl E. Bain, Jerome Beaty & J. Paul Hunter Copyright 1973 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. and published simultaneously in Canada by Goerge J. McLeod Limited, Toronto.

2) Plot

The interest generated by the plot varies for different kinds of plays. **The plot is usually structured with acts and scenes.**

Open conflict plays: rely on the suspense of a struggle in which the hero, through perhaps fight against all odds, is not doomed.

Dramatic thesis: foreshadowing, in the form of ominous hints or symbolic incidents, conditions the audience to expect certain logical developments.

Coincidence: sudden reversal of fortune plays depict climatic ironies or misunderstandings.

Dramatic irony: the fulfillment of a plan, action, or expectation in a surprising way, often opposite of what was intended.

Reference: *Encarta Encyclopedia*

3) Theme

The plot has been called the **body of a play** and the theme has been called **its soul**. Most plays have a conflict of some kind between individuals, between man and society, man and some superior force or man and himself. The events that this conflict provokes make up the plot. One of the first items of interest is the playwright's treatment of the plot and what he would draw from it. The same plots have been and will be used many times; it is the treatment that supplies each effort with originality or artistic worth. Shakespeare is said to have borrowed all but one of his stories, but he presented them so much better than any of the previous authors that he is not seriously criticized for the borrowing. The treatment of theme is equally varied.

If a play has a theme, we should be able to state it in general terms and in a single sentence, even at the risk of oversimplification. The theme of *Hamlet* is usually stated as the failure of a youth of poetic temperament to cope with circumstances that demand action. The theme of *Macbeth* is that too much ambition leads to destruction; a *Streetcar Named Desire*, and that he who strives hardest to find happiness oftentimes finds the least.

As indicated above, the statement of the play in specific terms is the plot presented. **Plot and theme should go hand in hand**. If the theme is one of nobility, or dignity, the plot must concern events and characters that measure up to that theme. As we analyze many plays, we find that some possess an excellent theme, but are supported by an inconsequential plot.

Reference: Wright, E.A. (1969). A PRIMER FOR PLAYGOERS. Englewood Cliffs; PRENTICE-HALL, INC., pp.156-158

4) Dialogue

Dialogue provides the substance of a play. Each word uttered by the character furthers the business of the play, contributes to its effect as a whole. Therefore, a sense of **DECORUM** must be established by the characters, i.e., what is said is appropriate to the role and situation of a character. Also the exposition of the play often falls on the dialogue of the characters. Remember exposition establishes the relationships, tensions or conflicts from which later plot developments derive.

Reference: Styan, J. L. *The Elements of Drama*. Cambridge University Press 1960

5) Convention

The means the playwright employs are determined at least in part by dramatic convention. Greek: Playwrights of this era often worked with familiar story material, legend about gods and famous families that the audience was familiar with. Since the audience was familiar

with certain aspects of these, the playwrights used allusion rather than explicit exposition. In representing action, they often relied on messengers to report off-stage action.

For interpretation the Greeks relied on the **CHORUS**, a body of onlookers, usually citizens or elders, whose comments on the play reflected reactions common to the community. These plays were written in metered verse arranged in elaborate stanzas. This required intense attention from the audience.

English Drama: Minor characters play an important role in providing information and guiding interpretation. The confidant, a friend or servant, listens to the complaints, plans and reminiscences of a major character. Minor characters casually comment among themselves on major characters and plot development. Extended **SOLILOQUY** enables a major character to reveal his thoughts in much greater detail than in natural dialogue. **ASIDES**, remarks made to the audience but not heard by those on the stage, are common. Realism: Toward the end of the nineteenth century, realistic depiction of everyday life entered the genre of drama, whereas the characters may be unconventional and their thoughts turbulent and fantasy-ridden.

Contemporary: Experimentation seems to be the key word here. A **NARRATOR** replaces the messenger, the chorus and the confidant. **FLASHBACKS** often substitute for narration. Many contemporary playwrights have abandoned recognizable setting, chronological sequence and characterization through dialogue.

Reference : *Encarta Encyclopedia*

6) Genre

Genre is a term that describes works of literature according to their shared thematic or structural characteristics. The attempt to classify literature in this way was initiated by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, where he distinguishes **tragedy, epic, and comedy** and recognizes even more fundamental distinctions between drama, epic, and lyric poetry. Classical genre theory, established by Aristotle and reinforced by Horace, is regulative and prescriptive, attempting to maintain rigid boundaries that correspond to social differences. Thus, tragedy and epic are concerned exclusively with the affairs of the nobility, comedy with the middle or lower classes.

Modern literary criticism, on the other hand, does not regard genres as dogmatic categories, but rather as aesthetic conventions that guide, but are also led by, writers. The unstable nature of genres does not reduce their effectiveness as tools of critical inquiry, which attempts to discover universal attributes among individual works, and has, since classical times, evolved theories of the **novel, ode, elegy, pastoral, satire**, and many other kinds of writing.

7) Audience

It is the act or chance of hearing; a reception by a great person; the person to hear. **Playhouse, script, actors, mise en scene**(the arrangement of actors and scenery on a stage), and **audience** are inseparable parts of the theatre.

8) Stagecraft

The stage creates its effects in spite of, and in part because of, definite physical limitations. Setting and action tend to be suggestive rather than panoramic or colossal. Both setting and action may be little more than hints for the spectator to fill out.

9) Stage Design

(1) Theater Space: Theater can also be discussed in terms of the type of space in which it is produced. Stages and auditoriums have had distinctive forms in every era and in different cultures. New theaters today tend to be flexible and eclectic in design, incorporating elements of several styles; they are known as multiple-use or multiple-form theaters.

A performance, however, need not occur in an architectural structure designed as a theater, or even in a building. The English director Peter Brook talks of creating theater in an "empty space." Many earlier forms of theater were performed in the streets, open spaces, market squares, churches, or rooms or buildings not intended for use as theaters. Much contemporary experimental theater rejects the formal constraints of available theaters and seeks more unusual spaces. In all these "found" theaters, the sense of stage and auditorium is created by the actions of the performers and the natural features of the space. Throughout history, however, most theaters have employed one of three types of stage: end, thrust, and arena. An end stage is a raised platform facing the assembled audience.

(2) The Proscenium Theater: Since the Renaissance, Western theater has been dominated by an end stage variant called the proscenium theater. The proscenium is the wall separating the stage from the auditorium. The proscenium arch, which may take several shapes, is the opening in that wall through which the audience views the performance. A curtain that either rises or opens to the sides may hang in this space. The proscenium developed in response to the desire to mask scenery, hide scene-changing machinery, and create an offstage space for performers' exits and entrances. The result is to enhance illusion by eliminating all that is not part of the scene and to encourage the audience to imagine that what they cannot see is a continuation of what they can see. Because the proscenium is (or appears to be) an architectural barrier, it creates a sense of distance or separation between the stage and the spectators. The proscenium arch also frames the stage and consequently is often called a peep-show or picture-frame stage.



(3) The Thrust Stage: A thrust stage, sometimes known as three-quarter round, is a

platform surrounded on three sides by the audience. This form was used for ancient Greek theater, Elizabethan theater, classical Spanish theater, English Restoration theater, Japanese and Chinese classical theater, and much of Western theater in the 20th century. A thrust may be backed by a wall or be appended to some sort of end stage. The upstage end (back of the stage, farthest from the audience) may have scenery and provisions for entrances and exits, but the thrust itself is usually bare except for a few scenic elements and props. Because no barrier exists between performers and spectators, the thrust stage generally creates a sense of greater intimacy, as if the performance were occurring in the midst of the auditorium, while still allowing for illusionistic effects through the use of the upstage end and adjacent offstage space.



(4) The Arena Stage: The arena stage, or theater-in-the-round, is a performing space totally surrounded by the auditorium. This arrangement has been tried several times in the 20th century, but its historical precedents are largely in nondramatic forms such as the circus, and it has limited popularity. The necessity of providing equal sight lines for all spectators puts special constraints on the type of scenery used and on the movements of the actors, because at any given time part of the audience will inevitably be viewing a performer's back. Illusion is more difficult to sustain in arena, since in most setups, entrances and exits must be made in full view of the audience, eliminating surprise, if nothing else. Nonetheless, arena, when properly used, can create a sense of intimacy not often possible with other stage arrangements, and, as noted, it is well suited to many nondramatic forms. Furthermore, because of the different scenic demands of arena theater, the large backstage areas associated with prosceniums can be eliminated, thus allowing a more economical use of space.



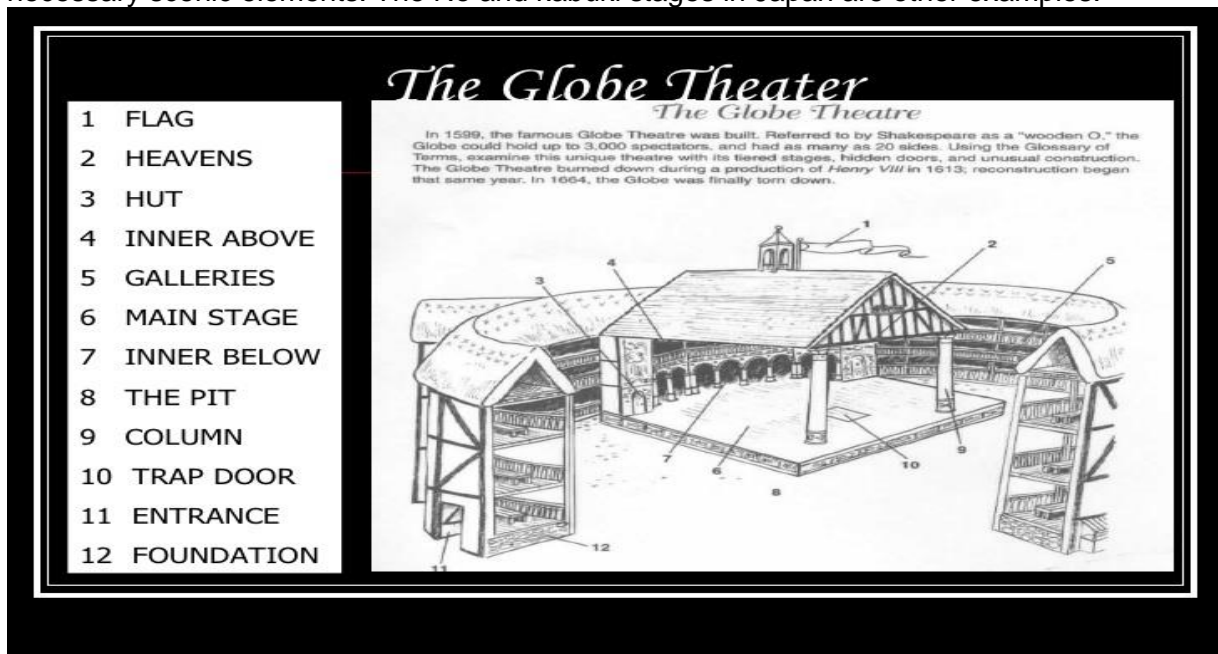
(5) Variant Forms: One variant form of staging is environmental theater, which has precedents in medieval and folk theater and has been widely used in 20th-century avant-garde theater. It eliminates the single or central stage in favor of surrounding the spectators or sharing the space with them. Stage space and spectator space become indistinguishable. Another popular alternative is the free, or flexible, space, sometimes called a **black-box theater** because of its most common shape and color. This is an empty space with movable seating units and stage platforms that can be arranged in any configuration for each performance.



(6) The Fixed Architectural Stage

Most stages are raw spaces that the designer can mold to create any desired effect or location; in contrast, the architectural stage has permanent features that create a more formal scenic effect. Typically, ramps, stairs, platforms, archways, and pillars are permanently built into the stage space. Variety in individual settings may be achieved by adding scenic elements. The Stratford Festival Theater in Stratford, Ontario, for example, has a permanent "inner stage" or "inner below"—a platform roughly 3.6 m (12 ft) high-jutting onto the multilevel thrust stage from the upstage wall. Most permanent theaters through the Renaissance, such as the *Teatro Olimpico* (1580) in Vicenza, Italy, did not use painted or built scenery but relied on similar permanent architectural features that could provide the

necessary scenic elements. The No and kabuki stages in Japan are other examples.



(7) Auditoriums: Auditoriums in the 20th century are mostly variants on the fan-shaped auditorium built (1876) by the composer Richard Wagner at his famous opera house in Bayreuth, Germany. These auditoriums are shaped like a hand-held fan and are usually raked (inclined upward from front to back), with staggered seats to provide unobstructed sight lines. Such auditoriums may be designed with balconies, and some theaters, such as opera houses, have boxes-seats in open or partitioned sections along the sidewalls of the auditorium—a carry-over from baroque theater architecture.



(8) Set Design: In Europe, one person, frequently called a scenographer, designs sets, costumes, and lights; in the U.S. these functions are usually handled by three separate professionals. Set design is the arrangement of theatrical space; the set, or setting, is the visual environment in which a play is performed. Its purpose is to suggest time and place and to create the proper mood or atmosphere. Settings can generally be classified as

realistic, abstract, suggestive, or functional.



Realistic set design



Abstract set design



Suggestive set design



Functional set design

(9) Stage Facilities: The use and movement of scenery are determined by stage facilities. Relatively standard elements include **trapdoors** in the stage floor, elevators that can raise or lower stage sections, **wagons** (rolling platforms) on which scenes may be mounted, and **cycloramas-curved canvas** (a pictorial representation, in perspective, of a landscape, battle, etc., on the inner wall of a cylindrical room or hall, viewed by spectators occupying a position in the center) or **plaster backdrops** used as a projection surface or to simulate the sky. Above the stage, especially in a proscenium theater, is the area known as the **fly gallery**, where lines for flying—that is, raising-unused scenery from the stage are manipulated, and which contains counterweight or hydraulic pipes and lengths of wood, or battens, from which lights and pieces of scenery may be suspended. Other special devices and units can be built as necessary. Although scene painting seems to be a dying art, modern scene shops are well equipped to work with plastics, metals, synthetic fabrics, paper, and other new and industrial products that until recently were not in the realm of theater.



Trapdoors



Rolling platforms



Cyclorama canvas



Plaster backdrops



fly gallery

(10) Lighting Design: Lighting design, a more ephemeral art, has two functions: to illuminate the stage and the performers and to create mood and control the focus of the spectators. Stage lighting may be from a direct source such as the sun or a lamp, or it may be indirect, employing reflected light or general illumination. It has four controllable properties: intensity, color, placement on the stage, and movement—the visible changing of the first three properties. These properties are used to achieve visibility, mood, composition (the overall arrangement of light, shadow, and color), and the revelation of form—the appearance of shape and dimensionality of a performer or object as determined by light.



(11) Costume Design: A costume is whatever is worn on the performer's body. Costume designers are concerned primarily with **clothing and accessories**, but are also often responsible for **wigs, masks, and makeup**. Costumes convey information about the character and aid in setting the tone or mood of the production. Because most acting involves impersonation, most costuming is actual or re-created historical or contemporary dress; as with scenery, however, costumes may also be suggestive or abstract. Until the 19th century, little attention was paid to period or regional accuracy; variations on contemporary dress sufficed. Since then, however, costume designers have paid great attention to authentic period style.



(12) Mask: A special element of costume is the mask. Although rarely used in contemporary Western theater, masks were essential in Greek and Roman drama and the *commedia dell'arte* and are used in most African and Oriental theater. The masks of tragedy and of comedy, as used in ancient Greek drama, are in fact the universal symbols of the theater. Masks obviate the use of the face for expression and communication and thus render the performer more puppet-like; expression depends solely on voice and gesture. Because the mask's expression is unchanging, the character's fate or final expression is known from the beginning, thereby removing one aspect of suspense. The mask shifts focus from the actor to the character and can thus clarify aspects of theme and plot and give a character a

greater universality. Like costumes, the colors and features of the mask, especially in the Orient, indicate symbolically significant aspects of the character. In large theaters masks can also aid in visibility.

(13) Makeup: Makeup may also function as a mask, especially in Oriental theater, where faces may be painted with elaborate colors and images that exaggerate and distort facial features. In Western theater, makeup is used for two purposes: to emphasize and reinforce facial features that might otherwise be lost under bright lights or at a distance and to alter signs of age, skin tone, or nose shape.



(14) Technical Production: The technical aspects of production may be divided into preproduction and run of production. Preproduction technical work is supervised by the technical director in conjunction with the designers. Sets, properties (props), and costumes are made during this phase by crews in the theater shops or, in the case of most commercial theater, in professional studios.

Props are the objects handled by actors or used in dressing the stage—all objects placed or carried on the set that are not costumes or scenery. Whereas real furniture and hand props can be used in many productions, props for period shows, nonrealistic productions, and theatrical shows such as circuses must be built. Like sets, props can be illusionistic—they may be created from papier-mâché or plastic for lightness, exaggerated in size, irregularly shaped, or designed to appear level on a raked stage; they may also be capable of being rolled, collapsed, or folded. The person in charge of props is called the props master or mistress.



(15) Sound and Sound Effects: Sound, if required, is now generally recorded during the preproduction period. From earliest times, most theatrical performances were accompanied by music that, until recently, was produced by live musicians. Since the 1930s, however, use of recorded sound has been a possibility in the theater. Although music is still the most common sound effect, wind, rain, thunder, and animal noises have been essential since the earliest Greek tragedies. Any sound that cannot be created by a performer may be considered a sound effect. Such sounds are most often used for realistic effect (for example, a train rushing by or city sounds outside a window), but they can also assist in the creation of mood or rhythm. Although many sounds can be recorded from actual sources, certain sounds do not record well and seem false when played through electronic equipment on a stage. Elaborate mechanical devices are therefore constructed to simulate these sounds, such as rain or thunder. Technicians also create special aural and visual effects simulating explosions, fire, lightning, and apparitions and giving the illusion of moving objects or of flying.

Reference: *Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopedia* copyright 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation.

10). Reading Drama and Seeing Theater

Less than a century ago, live plays could be seen only on the stage; today, most of us see drama in a variety of media: on film and television as well as in the theater. Yet for the past five hundred years or so we have a nontheatrical venue: by reading them in books. To see a play performed and to read it in a book are two very different activities, but these distinct experiences of drama text is fashioned into an event, something existing the place of the drama.

Performance	Reading
It is bound in space and time	No limit of space or time.
The characters are embodied by specific individuals	Various kinds of characters can be imagined.
The process of performance is irreversible	Flipping back a few pages to an earlier scene is possible.
Old tradition (theatrical event since Greek drama)	relatively a recent phenomenon

Greek, Latin, Medieval, Renaissance playwrights	(late 16 th century) Latin texts, printing technology, widespread literacy, a large reading public
Constructed mainly of actions	Constructed mainly of words
Influenced by speech (monolog, dialog, aside)	Can be seduced by the text by narrative
Visual effects	imaginations

Worthen, W. B. *The Harcourt Anthology of Drama*. Brief Edition. Thomson & Heinle: Boston, 2002.