

I. What is a Play?

A play is a story devised to be presented by actors on a stage before an audience.

"A play is a story..."

The audience sees a story about life presented in a lively way. The play is arrangements of dialogue (words) which make up episodes (whenever an important character enters or leaves the stage). Several episodes make up a scene (used to indicate that time or place has changed) while several scenes make up an act (a sign that there has been a major change in time or place.) There are usually two to three acts. There is a tradition in the theatre that the performance should take no more than two to three hours, so the story must be presented as clearly and quickly as possible.

"...devised to be presented by actors..."

This sets the play apart from all other forms of literature as the dramatist must always be aware of how the play will sound, rather than how it will be read. The dramatist is called the playwright. The playwright uses the tools of words, but also human tools - the actors, their bodies and faces, their voices and movements - and mechanical tools - the stage itself, sets, lighting, props.

"...on a stage..."

This may say more about written drama than any other part. The way in which the physical area is developed has an important effect on the ways in which a play is written.

"....before an audience."

This last part of the definition is a very important one. The playwright always has to be aware of the character of the audience. He must be aware of what people of the time will enjoy, be interested in, be thinking about. The playwright also has to be aware that many different people will see, and judge, his work.

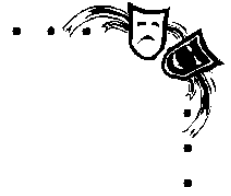
II. The Elements of a Play

The play is composed of four major elements - plot, character, theme, and style. These elements are usually obvious at once. So is the setting, which is usually used to support one of the four major elements. What makes each play unique is how the playwright chooses to treat the major elements, that is, which he tends to make the most important. The structure of the play, and how successful it is, will depend on which element the playwright chooses to emphasize.

Each character's action and speech express that character's personality. Dialogue is, thus, an essential tool for conveying character. To be effective, it must meet all of the following standards. It must have *economy*, that is, to the point, develop the action and move the action forward. It must be *appropriate*, that is, it must suit the situation and the character. It should have *pace*, it must keep the action moving. Lastly, it must have *artifice*, which means that the characters must always say the right thing at the right time.

The theme is the main idea behind the plot. It is the basic, unifying idea that gives purpose to the action. Although a play may have several themes, one is usually the most important. It is essential to discover that dominant theme and to discover the relationships between the theme and the characters.

THE HISTORY OF DRAMA



The word "drama" is a Greek term, meaning action. Conflict is inherent in its nature and the more significant and deeper the conflict, the more important the drama will be.

The earliest drama told stories of some god, and was usually presented in that god's honour. The rites of Dionysus or Bacchus, god of wine and fertility, gave rise to Greek drama, which eventually took two forms, tragedy and comedy.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, outlined the three unities, which he felt drama should follow. They were:

Unity of time: unity of time meant that the action portrayed in the play should not cover a period longer than twenty-four hours.

Unity of place: unity of place meant that all the action should occur in one setting.

Unity of action: unity of action meant that there should be no mixing of comedy and tragedy, and that only one major conflict should be presented.

Greek tragedy was written in verse, and was performed by not more than four actors and a chorus. The chorus was used to interpret or comment upon the characters and their actions. Some of the more important Greek tragedies still presented today are *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles (496? - 406 B.C.) and *Electra* by Euripides (485-406 B.C.) The Greek comedies were mainly satiric in nature, satirizing important contemporary men and social conditions.

Roman dramas were performed only in public celebrations, and were free of charge. They too presented tragedies (which were mainly revisions of Greek tragedies) and comedies, as part of huge gladiatorial or aquatic spectacles. A third type of drama, which became popular during the last phase of the Roman Empire, was mimes (no talking).

Medieval drama was Church-centered, and consisted of three types of plays. The first were mystery plays, which dramatized biblical stories. At first they were performed only in the church and in Latin, but later they were moved to the steps of the church and were presented in the language of the people. The second type of plays was the miracle plays, based on the lives of saints and the miracles they performed. The third type was the morality plays, allegories in which the actors personified such virtues as faith, hope and charity.

The drama of the Renaissance broke sharply with the drama of earlier periods. Man becomes the center of the drama, not as a victim of the gods or as a pawn in the conflict between heaven and hell, but in his own right. The earliest surviving English comedy is *Ralph Roister Doister*, written by Nicholas Udall (1505 - 1556). The drama of the Elizabethan period is marked by the work of the greatest of all English playwrights, William Shakespeare (1564-1616); the depth of feeling and characterization in his plays have ensured their continuing.



THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA



The elements of drama are very similar to the elements of a short story, because both are types of fiction. The elements of drama however, have some subtle distinctions.

Setting

This includes the time, place and accompanying circumstances. In modern drama, backdrops, scenery, costumes and props usually suggest setting. In Shakespearean drama, however, there were no elaborate settings, making it necessary for the dramatist or playwright to use dialogue to create setting in the audience's mind. While reading Shakespeare, pay attention to the descriptions that characters often give of their surroundings. These descriptions are meant to inform the audience of the setting.

Characters

In a drama, there are usually two main characters, the protagonist and the antagonist. There are also usually secondary and minor characters.

Protagonist - the dramatist must present a character so completely that the audience understands the reasons for this character's behaviour and decisions.

Antagonist - the conflict that the protagonist has with the antagonist forms the main external conflict in a drama

Secondary characters - these are characters whose actions have some bearing on the advancement of the main conflict; they contribute to plot development in some way

Minor characters - these are characters whose actions have no bearing on advancement of the main conflict. They are included in the drama for reasons other than plot development.

Plot

Plot is the sequence of incidents in the conflict of the protagonist, who is struggling consciously or unconsciously to gain an important objective. Dramatic conflicts are of three types:

protagonist vs. nature

protagonist vs. other character (s) *external conflicts*

protagonist vs. the unknown

protagonist vs. society

protagonist vs. self *internal conflict*

Usually, an incident early in the play sets in motion an external conflict, which in turn precipitates an internal conflict in the mind of the protagonist. This inner conflict and its resolution are the most significant features of the play. In a well-constructed plot, incidents that constitute the protagonist's struggle are interdependent. This means that the principles of cause and effect are present. If this sequence of events is not broken by coincidence, the plot has unity of action.

Theme

Theme in a drama is the comment that the author is making about life and people. In Shakespeare, themes are often repeated. The majority of Shakespearean tragedies contain a common theme: what a man is determines his fate OR character is destiny. Although this theme is present in the tragedies, each separate tragedy also has its own specific theme. Shakespeare was very much a man of his times, and wrote about the issues that were important to Elizabethan audiences. These issues include:

- power and authority
- struggles of individuals to free themselves from evil and misfortune
- politics
- relationships

DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS



soliloquy - the speaker is alone on stage and speaks to the audience, usually revealing his innermost feelings. Soliloquies tend to be an effective means of developing character.

aside - the speaker is never alone, but makes brief comments that are not part of the spoken dialogue

Neither a soliloquy or an aside can be heard, even by a secretly placed eavesdropper, by anyone else on the stage. This gives a character freedom to speak his mind.

dramatic irony - the difference between the situation as known to the audience and as supposed by the characters of the play or by some of them. The basis is ambiguity of meaning - a remark may have a surface meaning for the characters in the play but an added significance for the audience. The double meaning may be intended by the speaker or may simply be a casual statement.

pathos - an element composed to evoke pity or compassion

foil character - one character, who by contrast, sets off another character's characteristics. It is usually a sharp contrast, often between good and bad.

TYPES OF DRAMA There are many types of drama, and many combinations of types. The oldest and most important types of drama are comedy and tragedy.

Farce

Farce consists of "low" comedy episodes. They usually contain one-dimensional characters who are put into ludicrous situations. The standards of probability in motivation and even are violated in order to evoke maximum laughter. You may be familiar with such modern shows as "Royal Canadian Air Farce" or "This Hour Has 22 Minutes" which would fit into this category.

Melodrama

Usually melodrama contains a hero, a villain, and a heroine. These are flat characters that fit the description "good guy," "bad guy" and "damsel in distress." In melodrama credibility is sacrificed for pure emotional effect. You may remember old movies where the heroine is tied to the railroad tracks by the evil villain, and the hero (usually dressed in white) eventually comes to her rescue. Melodramas usually end with poetic justice; the person who is trying to trick another is tricked himself.

Comedy

In a comedy, the conflict results in the overcoming of opposing forces by the leading character(s) who have successfully solved the problem facing them or have gained material or spiritual satisfaction. Note that comedies do NOT have to be funny or amusing.

Tragedy

In a tragedy, the conflict results in death or disaster for the leading character(s) who have either failed to solve the problem facing them or have sacrificed material considerations for an ideal. The greatest dramas have been tragedies for a number of reasons. Basically however, a great play must have universal appeal. Every audience seems to appreciate the fundamental human emotions that are present in a tragedy: love, ambition, jealousy, revenge, etc. To create this appeal, the dramatist must have fine literary ability. Consequently, tragedies tend to be better written than comedies.