

Introduction to Drama

The Origin of Drama

Scholars of literature and historians believe that the roots of drama stem from primitive societies that used role-play to teach the codes and behaviour of each society as a part of a strategy to survive. The knowledge of the skills needed to hunt using the appropriate weapons, and an awareness of the rules stipulated for warfare are crucial to emerge as successful warriors or hunters. The re-enactment of the hunts by a group of hunters among the primitive groups dressed in animal hides probably gave rise to the first actors who used animal skin as costume to imitate an action and relate the story of their adventure to an audience, the non-hunters (Kramme 2).

Later, diverse methods could have been planned by the tribes to act out a successful hunt before the kill and this could have led to the use of magic to protect them from hidden dangers before they carried out the actual hunt. This repeated “magical theatre,” (Kramme 2) performance, as mentioned could have been made a practice, a ritual and the chosen one, the spiritual leader among the tribe, who is the shaman mediated the religious celebrations of the particular tribe. The oral repetition to teach the basic concepts of customs in relation to nature could have transmitted the mythical or historical stories in order to preserve race-memory of the tribe. Since the tribes remain in close contact with nature, the change of seasons, the cycles of the moon and the other natural phenomena are looked up with religious fervour and reverence. Ceremonies are conducted, performances, staged and sacrifices are made in veneration of the unexplainable aspects of nature to appease it and escape its wrath.

Religion and theatre are intertwined and performances have become inevitable in religious observances. The questions of life, death, and the after-life have led to the belief in a power that necessitates societal rituals. In order to vouchsafe alleviation of negativity and ominous predictions, impersonation or disguise to act out ceremonies to placate Gods had been carried out. Since then, civilisations have carried down this process of enactment over the years to usher newer connotations with respect to changing conditions of the people over periods of time. Traditions and oral practices have assumed wider implications that relate to several customs that have been transmitted to successive generations in several societies.

Mere dramatic performances of rituals and impersonation of characters cannot suffice a theatrical presentation for the presence of the audience is important. Theatre entails a separate audience of spectators and the performance is considered entertainment. However, since the sixteenth century, the terms **theatre** and **drama** have been used synonymously to roughly denote the representation or enactment of a story by actors in front of an audience to serve as recreation. Drama is derived from the Greek word *dran*, which means “to do” or “to perform,” which is closely related to the Greek word *drainein* that denotes “to be ready to do” and implies readiness to perform an action on stage (*The Shorter* 743).

The word theatre is derived from the Greek word *theatron*, which denotes a place to view and the space to enact dramatic performances. Actors and spectators involved acted out myths, legends and folklores to portray social conflicts, dilemmas and struggles of the times. The theatre is also used as a tool for issuing social and political propagandas, presenting religious rituals and educating the masses.

It is generally believed that the art of drama in a Western form of literature is grounded in Greek literature. Some scholars attribute the origin of drama to Egypt where a theatrical performance carved on a stone tablet, probably four thousand years old recounts how a three-day pageant that depicted actual battles, processions on boats and elaborate ceremonies, which narrated murder, dismemberment and resurrection of God Osiris was arranged and performed by Ikhnofret of Abydos. Music and dance associated with death and rejuvenation is represented in Egyptian hieroglyphs from around 2500 BCE and recorded by the Greek scholar Herodotus (c.484 – 425/413 BCE). It is presumed that in China, around 5400 BCE, rituals and worship to the accompaniment of music and dance were enjoyed by Emperors. Written classical Chinese poetic drama is recorded from 700s BCE only. In ancient India, dances were linked with rituals and seasons.

Greek Drama: The Beginnings

Early Greek drama is associated with celebration and performances as a part of festivals and celebrations for sowing and harvesting of crops to commemorate **God Dionysus** the Greek God of wine, winemaking, grape cultivation, fertility, ritual madness, theatre, and religious ecstasy who dies and is reborn every year. It is believed that to honour his death, a group of fifty men would dance around an altar on which a goat would later be sacrificed. He may have been worshiped as early as 1500-1100 BC by the Mycenaean Greeks. His Roman name is Bacchus.

In his play *Acharnians* (425 BC), *Aristophanes* (450 BC-388 BC) ridicules the way in which God Dionysus is worshipped. As a prayer is recited, a family, which occupies a higher status in the society walks in procession and the daughter, a maiden carries the sacrifice for God. A slave carries a phallus and the father sings an indecorous song, while the wife watches from the roof of the house. At times, the procession would be held in tandem with the symbolic wedding of the wife of a prominent citizen of the state to the temple of Dionysus, who is represented as a long-bearded elderly man with two pint-sized horns on his forehead that mark his vitality; however, this later came to be associated with adultery. The crown made of ivy and the budding *thyrsus*, which is a ritual staff of nard or fennel twisted and wound with ivy and vine leaves and covered with a pine cone indicates that God Dionysus is unaffected by change of seasons.

Virgins lead the procession of God Dionysus and Bacchantes, in the attire as satyrs (the goat-like deities) in goatskins or in garments with wine stains on them and faces smudged with dregs of wine accompany them closely. A few of the Bacchantes wear death masks and grave clothes to embody the dead. The goat-singers chant the tragic or ritualistic goat-songs called *tragos*, from which genre, tragedy would later arise. Dithyrambic songs and dances are presented at the temple and alongside, and young men known as *komos*, after participating in the procession on chariots would sing witty and bawdy songs called *comedies* and take part in comic phallic sport events.

Dionysus is believed to be the friend of Icarius, the King of Icaria. The tyrant Pisistratus who ruled the city of Dionysus in 6th century BC is supposed to have organised a series of public festivals and one of these the “City of Dionysia” in honour of the God Dionysus is marked by music, song, dance and poetry. Thespis (580–520 BC) of Icaria left the audience dumbstruck when he leaped into a wooden cart and recited poetry as if he was the character whose lines he was reading. He is accorded the first actor for his solo performance in verse without the chorus and the term *thespian* has been assigned to actors since then.

The dramatic contests, a part of the festival would extend up to five or six days. On the last three days, different playwrights would present four plays each on consecutive days. The first three plays are tragedies that form a trilogy that are related by theme, myth or characters. The fourth, the satyr play is a lewd burlesque that is insignificant. Playwrights would contest fiercely to win the laurel wreath at the competition.

The beginning of Greek drama is found in a kind of ritual choral hymn, called a *dithyramb*, performed by men and boys in honour of God Dionysus. The narrative songs in the dithyramb verse by a single person, and later performed by a group called the chorus initiated dramatic art. As the Greek society developed and became more composite, the dithyramb began to lose its religious function and was replaced by a certain form of storytelling. Initially, characters were not assigned specific voices, but a second voice was introduced that paved the way for a song narrative that later came to be known as the dialogue.

Early Greek and Roman Plays

Greek Drama

The Greeks used complex stage devices to make the plays as effective as possible. Performances took place in the open on the sides of a hill surrounding a circular area called the *orchestra*, where the chorus danced. Wooden seats which were later replaced by stones were built to accommodate around 17000 spectators. A small area, the *skene* was built at the rear of the acting area where the actors changed masks and costumes. The *skene* was later built with stone and painted according to the scene to be depicted. The God-walk was situated on the roof of the *skene* where the actors depicting Gods delivered their speeches.

A hoist that resembled a crane, the *machina* was mobile enough to enable actors to appear as if they were flying and lower them from the roof of the *skene*. The character that appeared at the *machina* was usually represented as the God from Mount Olympus who came down to earth to intervene in the play and resolve conflicts. The use of this feature is known as *deus ex machina*, translated as God from the machine. This term is used even in contemporary times to indicate the use of an artificial plot device in a play to resolve issues.

The actors were limited in number and a tragic actor distinguished himself by wearing masks, padded costumes and thick-soled, high-heeled laced shoes called "buskins" or "cothurnus". In contrast, the comic actor wore light-weight, low shoes called "socks". The masks prevented the actors from changing expression and hence the actors' expressions remained consistent throughout the performance. Since the portion allotted to the speaking place was insignificant, the depiction of elaborate scenes and magnificent stage pictures was improbable. Similarly, the distance of the actors from the spectators made it impossible to dramatise detailed gestures. The language employed in the dramas was rhetorical and not colloquial or conversational. The presence of the chorus with their solemn dancing and singing imparted a lyrical and theatrical quality to the performances on stage.

The chorus that played an immense role in the early Greek plays functioned primarily to elaborate the situation, make the audience aware of the happenings and comment on established norms to engage with the actors. However, the role of the chorus was taken over by the actors in the later plays. Some of the modern plays that employ the chorus are the tragic play *Antigone* (1944) by the French dramatist John Anouilh (1910-1987), the stage manager in the metatheatrical three-act play *Our Town* (1938) by the American playwright Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) and *El Gallo* in the

musical theatre *The Fantasticks* (1960) with music by the American composer Harvey Schmidt and lyrics by the American lyricist Tom Jones.

The Greek theatre projected clashes between destiny and human ambition. The Greek tragedies elucidated the futility of human efforts to challenge fate. **Aeschylus** (525-456 BC), Sophocles (496-406 BC) and Euripides (485-406 BC) are the greatest writers of Greek tragedy who wrote in the 4th and 5th centuries BC. Aeschylus contributed around 90 plays out of which only 7 have been preserved. He is referred by many critics as the father of tragedy. Aeschylus is noted for his majestic language and unique style of presentation. His only surviving Greek trilogy, *The Oresteia* (5th century BC) is the story of the murder of Agamemnon, the revenge taken by his children and the punishment and subsequent acquittal of his son. The play involves the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes, the trial of Orestes, the end of the curse on the House of Atreus and the pacification of the Erinyes.

Sophocles is recognised for his well-crafted plays, brilliant plot-structure and majestic language that together beautify and unify his works. His belief in the divine qualities that human beings possess allowing them to struggle against fate brings about an amazing balance between the intervention of Gods in the affairs of men and man's struggle against fate portrayed in his plays, and hence his characters emerge the strongest ever to walk on stage in the efforts to put with the trials and tribulations of life. His *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC) stands as one of the most powerful and exceptional examples of dramatic irony that Aristotle described it as the ideal tragedy. *Antigone* (~441BC) a great tragedy written by Sophocles, describes the efforts of Antigone to bury her brother Polynices who is denied a proper burial by their uncle Creon for murdering Eteocles, their sibling. She is left to die in a cave for disobeying Creon and only when his world crumbles, does Creon realise the futility of pride and punishment that are against the laws of the Gods.

Euripides depicts the imbroglios in people's lives as a result of the cataclysms arising in human relationships, and his plays succinctly revealed pathos, sorrow and compassion of human ties and familial bonds. Of the 92 plays written by him, 17 tragedies and one satyr play subsist. *The Trojan Women*, first presented at the City Dionysia of 415 BC and the two other unconnected tragedies *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*, and the comedic satyr play *Sisyphos* are lost to antiquity. *Medea* (431 BC) is the tragedy of a woman who seeks revenge on her husband to the extent of killing her sons in order to grieve him. *Medea* and *Antigone* are unparalleled poignant depictions of women in literature.

Classical Greek comedy is divided into three periods- old, middle and new. The exceptional Greek author of the comedy of the old period is **Aristophanes** whose 11 out of the 40 plays are preserved. An accomplished satirist and social critic, he mocked the leaders of Athens and their Gods. Three of his best known plays are *The Frogs* (405 BC), a written contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in Hades, judged by Dionysus himself; *The Clouds* (423 BC), a travesty on Socrates and Greek education; and *Lysistrata* (411 BC), a derisive indictment on war. His first 9 plays, known for wild comic fantasy are labelled Old Comedy. His last two plays are categorised as Middle Comedy for their quiet and coherent nature.

Antiphanes (408 to 334 BCE), the comic poet of Athens wrote during the middle period. His plays concentrate on myths that do not feature persons of national importance and professional expertise. The other plays by him focus on the intrigues of individual lives. **Menander** (342/41-290 BC), the most influential of the new period wrote the notable comedies *Dyskolos* (317–316 BC) and *Samia* (315 BC), and among

the hundred scripts he had written only one of the scripts, *Dyskolos* survives. His comedies are centred on amorous manoeuvres of young lovers and though he is not an accomplished writer, he greatly influenced the Roman comedy writers Plautus and Terence, who later motivated the English writers of the Middle Ages.

Roman Drama

While most of the Roman plays were adaptations of the Greek ones, comic representations of daily life were interspersed with comedy and the development of plot or character was neglected. The Roman playwright of the Old Latin period Plautus (254-184 BC) and the Roman African playwright Terence (195/185-159? BC) were the two prominent writers of Roman comedy. There weren't any permanent theatres and a temporary stage was erected when a presentation was required. It was only after two hundred years that the amphitheatres, the large circular arenas surrounded by tiers of seats were built. During the beginning of the 1st century AD, Seneca (4 BC-AD 65) the Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman, and dramatist emerged one of the prominent writers of tragedy. Ten plays are endorsed to Seneca and he is popular for the plays *Medea* (50 BC), *Phaedra* (~54 AD), *Thyestes*, *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon* (1 AD), that serve as the impetus for the type of drama known as **Revenge Tragedy**, starting with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and extending into the Jacobean era.

Drama in Medieval Europe

There were no permanent theatres in England and a partial manuscript of the Western European liturgical drama of the 10th century is the only evidence of performance in the Middle Ages. The liturgical drama was performed by monks on Easter. These plays were in the form of a question-and-answer song in Latin and the performers were primarily priests and choir boys, but nuns were allowed to participate only after a brief period. The **Saint plays** or **Miracle plays** and **Mystery plays** became popular forms of drama of the church. While the **Saint plays** focussed on legends of saints, the **Mystery plays** were based on biblical history. Some Mystery plays originating from the towns such as Chester, York and Coventry still subsist and are regularly performed. The **Passion Play**, which directs to the last week of Christ's life is a celebrated liturgical drama performed for the Easter service. The **Passion Play** is still performed in Europe at Oberammergau, Germany by the citizens of the Bavarian village, where it was first performed in 1634 and is being recreated every 10 years since 1760.

The early Saint plays and Mystery plays were performed in the churches on raised platforms called **mansions** that represented biblical settings such as Heaven, Hell and the Sea of Galilee. When these dramas gained popularity, the performances were shifted to the town square where the mansions were built in a straight line. Evidences prove that the players went around several places to depict the lives of saints and the life of Christ using these temporary and movable settings.

Theatre on the Streets

By the late 14th century, craft guilds were formed by the groups of players and they overtook the presentation of the plays in England. The performances by the guilds were held during the festival of Corpus Christi, which had been officially inaugurated in AD1311. While most of the members of the guilds were associated with the church, they were secular in nature and the actors spoke in English so that all the people could

understand the religious depictions. The liturgical plays were presented by the guilds on **pageant wagons**, the stages on wheels. These wagons comprised of two levels, the upper level, which was the platform stage and the lower one, the dressing room. Each guild had its pageant wagon decorated depending on the play to be enacted in the **cycle**, which was a series of short plays that illustrated the conscientious description of the creation of the world by God until Doomsday. The performances staged included those of Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, Moses receiving the Ten Commandments or the resurrection of Christ.

Secular Dramas, Morality Plays and Moral Interludes

The secular dramas called **folk dramas** developed simultaneously along the liturgical productions. The folk plays were popular performances conducted outdoors during planting and harvest times and on Christmas. Apart from the innumerable lively, humorous and commonplace incidents staged by the folk group, the most important performance is the Robin Hood plays (c.1300) with the hero robbing the rich and passing on the booty to the poor.

Morality plays replaced the folk dramas in the 15th century. They were didactic in nature and preached the differences between moral values and sin in the context of religion. These plays were peculiar in that they were allegorical representations that employed symbolic characters that corresponded to abstract personae. Poverty, Knowledge, Ignorance, Austerity, Pride, Honesty, Truth, Vices and Virtues, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Good and the Evil surfaced as characters that debated and struggled against each other so that the audience recognised and differentiated one from the other, chastised themselves and led a fruitful life. *Everyman* is the only Morality play that is still being performed.

Since the ecclesiastics disapproved the Morality plays of the conventional liturgical drama, the plays were replaced by the **Moral Interludes** in the early 16th century. The Moral Interludes were shorter in length than the traditional Morality plays and they incorporated several humorous characters and incidents. John Heywood's (1497- 1580) farcical interlude *The Four P's* (1520-1522) is quite popular. A Pardoner, a Pedlar, a Palmer and a [Pothecary] are the characters in the play that engage in humorous conversation. The other interlude by him is *The Play of the Weather* (1533). Later, the secular dramatists, under the patronage of the nobility formed the initial acting companies. Several varieties of drama such as the chronicle plays, productions based on historical events, masques and inventive displays were written and performed under the influence of the patrons and some of the presentations even lionised the nobility.

Summary

The origin and evolution of drama in the earlier phase is a mere act of imitation in the primitive form during the prehistoric times with the only evidences being the rudiments of engravings. The growth and development of civilisations necessitated several modes of expression of thoughts and emotions. In tune with the changes in nature, the early societies discovered drama or enactments to communicate, celebrate and pay obeisance to their deities. The Greek drama began initially with festivities for God Dionysius that included songs, spectacles, dance and dialogues of a particular nature. Thespis is recognised the first actor and with his performance novel mode of expression arose. To the view of thousands of spectators, dramatists in Greece staged

their plays in the amphitheatre and included various dramatic devices to enhance artistic and win accolades.

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Aristophanes, Antiphanes and Menander to name a few later prominent Greek dramatists influenced the Roman writers Terence and Plautus with their tragedies and comedies that had profound influence on the European stage. Beginning with the Miracle and the Mystery plays by the Church, in Latin, the English drama gradually became secular and dealt with moral issues, principles to be followed in life and social commitments to be made, using English as the medium of instruction. Under the patrons, the English drama opened new vistas for exposition, commentary and commendation.

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