

A Comprehensive View of the Features and Categories of Drama and Theatre- Part I

Introduction

Drama is the confluence of several facets that relate to and contribute to the advancement and expansion of the genre to adapt to the demands of contemporary times. The major elements of drama are categorised into three important groups, namely **the literary, technical and performance**. While plot, character, script, setting, monologue and dialogue relate to the literary factor, the scenery, costumes, sound, music and makeup constitute the technical elements. Acting, speaking and non-verbal expressions are characterised as the components of performance. Each constituent undergoes modifications in accordance with socio-economic and political conditions, cultural changes, religious beliefs and the response of the audience of the particular epoch. The essential elements of drama specifically discussed in this module are setting, plot, character, structure, style, theme, audience and dialogue. The other parameters would be examined in the course of the modules.

The Components of Drama

Setting

The setting of the drama provides adequate information about the play and its connotations, the changes in the deportment of the characters and predicts their actions. This denotes that a suitable environment is created by the dramatist to inform about the context in which the main action of the story is situated. Since the dramatist works in a restricted space with minimal equipment, the settings on the stage have to satisfy the audience to experience the play completely. The time, place and the social environment together account for the dramatic action that sets the drama in motion. The setting provides the atmosphere to the background of the play. The use of lighting, props and scenery supplement the performance of the play and the dramatic text is a verbal input into the description of the setting of the play.

The plays of the early twentieth century of Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Anton Chekov are realistic in nature and hence they require elaborate stage properties for their lively enactment in a realistic environment. In contrast, the plays of later twentieth century of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter among the other Absurd dramatists do not require extensive stage arrangements because they overtly flout the conventions of drama. Time is an important factor and many contemporary plays that make use of nonrealistic settings discard time and place. Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) and *Top Girls* (1982) by Caryl Churchill are developed in a background that sets time apart. Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1939) and Churchill's *Top Girls* use myths in relation to society. In these dramas, the stage is built to effect the desired response from the audience, which is quite challenging.

Plot

A plot in drama designates the plan, scheme or arrangement of events. The plot accounts for the integrity, unity and coherence of the play to enable the audience to comprehend the events in the play and associate the incidents in a logical manner. Incidents and characters are organised so as to induce curiosity and suspense in the spectators and enable them to delineate the specifics of characterisation that are related to the plot. Aristotle, in his *Poetics* (335 BC) remarks that the plot is the "soul

of tragedy". Dramatic plot, according to Aristotle comprises of exposition, conflict, rising action and climax followed by a falling action and resolution. A plot involves a conflict that could be external, between the major character and the others in the play or internal that takes place in the mind of the protagonist or it could include both. Aristotle mentions that the plot must be well-constructed with a definite beginning, middle and an end and its action must be cohesive. Aristotle divides plots into two-**the simple and the complex ones**. A simple plot is one in which the action is simple and continuous and the change of fortune of the character takes place without the reversal of the situation and recognition. In a complex plot, conversely, the change of fortune of the character is associated with a reversal of the situation or recognition or by both.

Aristotle identifies two types of plots- **the unified plot and the episodic plot**. The unified plot is the conventional form that based on causality where one event causes another to happen. The play starts from the beginning, moves on to the middle, where the incidents take place as a consequence of what happened initially and culminates when the conflicts are resolved in the end, which is definite. The removal of any one incident would affect the organic structure or coherence of the play. In contrast, the episodic plot is devoid of the causal relationship between the incidents and the removal of any aspect of the plot would not disturb the unity of the play. Though Aristotle disapproved the episodic plot, modern dramatists resort to this strategy.

The **subplot** or underplot is a secondary line of action in a drama that usually contrasts with or reinforces the main plot. In the modern Absurd plays, the plot remains static without any appreciable development. In some plays of the later twentieth century, the plots are circular in the sense that the play ends where it has begun as in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or begins where it ended as in Beckett's *Endgame*. Contemporary drama usually rejects a clearly demarcated plot and prefers the disjointed and fragmentary one.

Character

Characters are indispensable to drama. Each character in a play is distinct in every aspect of physical, social, economic background and role in the play. The plot of the play centers around the character and the dramatic action of the play is led by the characters. The process of developing a character is called characterisation. The character is revealed through the dialogue and through the actions of the actor. In Greek drama, the best actor in the lead role was called the protagonist and the deuteragonist supported the hero throughout the narrative. The antagonist is the rival who sets forth the conflict in the play.

In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E.M. Forster classifies characters into **flat and round** depending on the pattern of their behaviour. A flat character is built around a single idea or quality that remains unchanged over the course of the narrative. Benvolio, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a flat character who remains composed and balanced in temperament and strives to maintain peace between the discordant families. Queen Gertrude, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a weak character who fails to recognise Hamlet's animosity for Claudius. She is an example of a flat character that is unaware of Claudius' intrigues to usurp his brother's throne and machinations to trap her in marriage. Hamlet, on the other hand is a round character, mysterious, enigmatic, reserved, contemplative, but prone to procrastination, which is his tragic flaw. A round character is complex and capable of growth and change in the course of the narrative.

A **foil** is a character that exhibits similar traits or opposite ones to a greater or lesser degree than the main character. A confidant (male), is someone in whom the central character confides in, and reveals his thoughts, emotions and intentions, which could be caught only by the audience, and in the process unfolds his or her personality. For instance, Horatio is the confidant of Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. (feminine-confidante).

Stock characters that frequently appear in plays are differentiated from the other characters by their flatness. So, they are parodied, criticised and considered clichéd depictions. Stock characters like the buffoon, bawdy soldiers, a hag, the miserly father, a mad scientist, an outlaw, a superhero and so on. A *raisonneur* is a character who functions as the spokesperson of the playwright and conveys certain truths underlined in the plot to the audience, which is similar to the chorus in ancient Greek drama. The Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is the perfect example of a *raisonneur* who speaks with clarity and reason to make Lear recognise and realise his mistakes.

Structure

The dramatic structure refers to the organisation of events that includes the selection and order of the scenes in a play. Aristotle, in *Poetics* mentions that the plot must be well-structured and organic with a proper beginning, middle and an end. He mentions: "A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end". The plot must be complete in the sense that it should be logical and the incidents should be so perfectly bound together by the plot that each action would indelibly lead to the other. The Roman classicist critic Horace (65 BC-8 BC) proposes the five-act structure for a play in his *Ars Poetica* (19 BC) and claims that the length of a play should neither be too short nor exceed five acts.

In 1863, the German playwright Gustav Freytag advocated the five-act dramatic structure named **Freytag's Pyramid** that is constructed on:

- i. Exposition (introduction part or the initial incident)
- ii. Rising action (rise or growth of action that leads to the crisis)
- iii. Climax (the crisis)
- iv. Falling action (return or fall or resolution) and
- v. Catastrophe (denouement, resolution, or revelation) (Chandler 100).

Modern and postmodern plays deviate from this model and the dramatist experiments with the structure of the play.

The dramas of the twentieth century plays are classified as climactic, episodic and circular. The plays are said to be climactic in structure if the action takes place in a short period of time, has a fewer number of characters, scenes and events, and a tightly-constructed plot without any loosely knit elements that would fit comfortably into the label of a well-made play; the standing examples are the plays of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Arthur Miller.

Plays with the episodic structure consist of numerous episodes that extend over longer periods of time and take place in different locales. Episodic drama abounds in characters and includes parallel plots and subplots that grow in tandem with the main plot. Shorter scenes often intervene the longer ones and the comic and the serious scenes surface in a particular pattern. The plays of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe are characterised episodic in structure.

The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd maintain a circular structure in the sense that they do not progress in a linear manner and the action fails to move forward in the

play, thereby the play ends where it begins or vice-versa. The plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter fall into this category.

Style

Every playwright has a unique way of presentation of dialogues and treatment of stage devises and costumes. The specific period of time, nationality, affinity to a particular ideology and personal likes and dislikes account for divergent modes of presentation on stage beginning from Realism, Naturalism and moving on to Symbolism, Expressionism and so on. While the realistic style portrays a convincing imitation of real life situations and tries to create an illusion of reality on the stage with the use of language that seems to be as close as possible to real life, the naturalistic plays attempt to present a part of life in all its harsh reality and approach the actual situation more precisely than the realist.

The Symbolist movement that originated in France in the latter half of the 19th century, was interested in the spiritual realm of man's being, his dreams, fears and fantasies. Drama picturised moods, suggestions and evocations by deploying stylised language, dislocating time sequence, utilising masked characters, distorting stage sets and including special lights and sound effects. By the method of indirection, and the use of symbols from religious and arcane customs and rituals, the dramatists imbued the stage with awe and wonder that shook the spectators. The Expressionistic style of drama, with its origin in Germany in the beginning of the 20th century, dwelt into man's subconscious existence through innovations in language, structure of the play and theatrical effects.

Theme

Theme, the pivotal and unifying aspect of the plot is the predominant idea that a play conveys and relates to all the major specifics of the story. It is usually implied, but gets revealed as the play progresses. Theme suggests the playwright's views expressed through the story line, stated by a character or formed from the interplay of the plot, character, and dialogue. While ancient dramatists borrowed incidents from epics, myths and histories as themes for their plays, later dramatists focused on social issues, the complexities in human relationships, and the predicament of mankind to point out to a few.

Audience

Theatre infuses pleasure and provides aesthetic gratification that depends on the views of the audience. Aristotle believed that the enactment of a tragedy purges negative feelings. The audience of ancient Greek drama were extremely influential that they often interrupted the play by mocking the actors, yelling or throwing items if they disliked the performance. The Elizabethan spectators comprised of people from all the classes of the society, so Shakespeare wrote his plays to entertain all the classes of people. While the noblemen sat in boxes in the playhouses, the ladies in the galleries, the groundlings occupied the pit. The ordinary folk engaged in all forms of revelry even during the performance. The audience loved the supernatural element, the spectacles and appreciated depictions of battles and murders. Bertolt Brecht, through his concept of **epic theatre** visualised the contemplative audience that responded to the shattered the illusions of reality on stage. The audience of contemporary theatre partakes of the extraordinary experiences as little effort is made

to convey a particular message during a performance because the plot is absent and the theatre is open to interpretations. Moreover, Street and Ritualistic theaters engage the audience in the performances.

Dialogue

Language and drama is expressed in the form of monologue, aside, soliloquy and dialogues. Through dialogues, the nature of the character and the association with the others is revealed. The drama progresses through the dialogue by providing necessary exposition of the past events, exposing complexities in relationship, and delving into the tensions and conflicts that are incorporated in the plot. Meaning may often be communicated through indirections. The unspoken thought or motivation underlying a dialogue is referred as the **subtext** and considered the “inner essence” of drama by the Russian dramatist Konstantin Stanislavski.

Casual conversation is the most natural way in which speakers exchange their thoughts. However, a dialogue in a drama is a speech devised by the playwright for the characters that is specific within the canvas of the play. The dialogue exposes the dramatic situation and the relationship of the characters to each other, the attitudes, conflicts and their connections within the fictional world. A dialogue is more complex than a casual conversation because the entire presentation is not merely an interaction between the audience and the drama, but also a form of communication between the playwright and the audience. While the Symbolist and Expressionist theaters use symbols and special theatrical effects respectively, the Theatre of the Absurd explores the use of colours to experiment with non-standard forms of speech, stammer, hesitations, silences, pauses as newer forms of expressions.

The Types of Drama

I. Tragedy

Representations that project serious actions that are catastrophic in the end for the protagonist is termed tragedy. Greek tragedy is one of the earliest forms of drama and Aristotle has outlined characteristic features of the tragedy and the tragic hero in *Poetics*. The earliest known tragedies have been written by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and the Roman dramatist Seneca. In English literature, the Elizabethan period witnessed the production of the finest works of English tragedy by dramatists Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare and John Webster. The first English tragedy is *Gorboduc* (1562) by the English playwrights Thomas Norton (1532-1584) and Thomas Sackville (1536-1608). With the passage of time, considerable changes in the characteristics of tragedy have contributed to the expansion of this mode of presentation which shall be discussed in the sections that follow.

Classical Greek tragedy

Features

- The plot is chosen from Greek mythology, which is well known to all the citizens so that they can easily follow the main story line of the play.
- Characters wear padded costumes, heels and large masks to make themselves visible to the huge audience. There is no scope for any quick changes in disposition.
- Dialogue is rhetorical and not conversational in nature. Scenes of battles are narrated.
- The chorus is a group of men who wear masks and sing and dance and make comments on the moral, social and religious attitudes of the age.
- The dramatist has to follow the three unities of time, place and action.

- Aristotle defines tragedy as “the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself...incorporating incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions.” The tragic hero could be one who is of noble birth or high rank. He should be virtuous, but makes an error in judgement (*hamartia*), which is responsible for the reversal of his fortunes (*peripeteia*). This is accompanied by the moment when a crucial truth is discovered or some insight is gained by the protagonist (*anagnorisis*). The ultimate effect of the resolution of tragic drama on the audience is purgation of emotional tensions (*catharsis*). Tragedy, by arousing emotions in people, has a therapeutic effect as cleansing of emotions takes place.
- Aeschylus’ *Oresteseia* trilogy; Euripides’ *Medea*; and Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (429 BC) are some of the best surviving Greek tragedies.

Senecan or Revenge Tragedy

The name is derived from the type of drama written and popularised by the Roman dramatist Seneca (4 BC- AD 65), whose plays are marked by bloodshed and the main theme is retribution with violence against the reprobates. Senecan tragedies feature bloody revenge and the deployment of supernatural elements. Seneca’s plays influenced the Elizabethan tragedies and the French Neoclassical tragedies.

Features

- Revenge is the predominant theme and a morally upright protagonist is pitted against scheming antagonists who are criminals.
- Oratorical and fervent speeches are made and Stichomythia, the precipitous exchange of dialogue that gives a sense of argument is employed.
- Murder, torture and other horrific incidents of violence are either reported or depicted by dumb show. Any form of disguise, murder, and supernatural interferences are inimitable to the progress of the drama.
- *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) by Thomas Kyd (1558- 1594) is the apt example of the revenge tradition in English drama. The subject is murder and the hunt for revenge includes sensational incidents, suicide, play-within-the play and a gruesome end with bloodshed on the stage. Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1592) also belongs to this mode.
- William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1590) and *Hamlet* (1603); and the horror plays by John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* (1612-13) are exemplars of this form.

The Great Tragedies of William Shakespeare

Hamlet (1601), *Othello* (1603), *King Lear* (1605), and *Macbeth* (1606) are the Great Tragedies.

Features

- The protagonists are persons of high rank, but they move among persons of all the classes of the society.
- The main characters suffer from a tragic flaw in their character that leads to their downfall. As Bradley observes, “character is destiny”. Hamlet’s downfall is

due to procrastination; Othello's, suspicion; King Lear's, excessive love for his daughters; and Macbeth's, vaulting ambition.

- The dialogues rendered by the main characters is poetical although it lapses to the colloquial and the familiar when the dialogues are uttered by characters of lower rank.
- The unities of time and place are completely discarded and the unity of action rests on the ingenuity of the dramatist to interweave the action with the main plot and the subplots.
- Violence and action predominate; the only exception is *Hamlet*.
- Comic relief, the inclusion of humorous scenes to relieve the intensity of the tragic emotions and movements is included.

Neoclassical Tragedy

In the 16th century, Italian and French dramatists modified the ancient Greek and the Senecan models and established a form of Neoclassical tragedy that differed from the earlier ones.

Features

- The chief characters are noblemen or persons of higher rank in the society.
- Importance is given to the relationship of the hero and the heroine.
- The chorus is replaced by the confidant who has little to do in the action of the play except listen to the confessions of the protagonist and offer sympathy.
- The playwright exposes the daily life of individuals in an elevated and poetic language.
- The French playwrights Pierre Corneille's *Medée* (1635) and *Le Cid* (1636); and Jean Racine's *Andro Maquae* (1667) and *Phedre* (1677) are noted examples of Neoclassical tragedy.

Heroic tragedy

Influenced by the French Neoclassical drama of Pierre Corneille, the plays were written during the Restoration period. Sir William Davenant (1606-68) established this kind of drama in England. John Dryden (1631-1700) is regarded the best exponent of this form.

Features

- The conflict between love on the one hand and duty on the other is the main subject of a heroic tragedy. Cataclysmic events such as war are depicted and they affect an entire nation. The theme of the heroic tragedy is of immense significance and the emotions presented are intense and gripping.
- The scale of the tragedy is usually set in exotic and faraway lands such as Mexico or India.
- The hero of this type of tragedy possesses great strength and moral virtues and the heroine is exceptionally beautiful and virtuous.
- These characters are torn between their passionate love and their duty towards the country or family.
- The language used is melodramatic and verbose.

- These tragedies are written in closed rhyming pairs of iambic pentameter lines. Due to its association with the heroic tragedy, this verse form is also known as **heroic verse** or **heroic couplet**.
- John Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* (1670), *Love Triumphant* (1694) and *All for Love* (1677) are recognised examples of the heroic tragedy. George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham ridiculed the conventions of the heroic drama in his play *The Rehearsal* (1671).

Domestic Tragedy

This subgenre concentrates on the problems faced by the middle or lower class society. The English dramatist George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) and the German poet and dramatist Christian Friedrich Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena* (1844) are examples of a domestic tragedy. The term "Domestic tragedy" is also used to describe the plays of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen.

Features

- Written in prose, the plays are serious in tone and they depict realistic events.
- Devoid of triviality, the concerns and everyday problems of the middle or lower classes of the society are explicitly portrayed. The plays are centered around domestic matters, and personal grievances rather than issues of national and political importance or other grave issues that plague the society.
- The characters are the common folk and the problems outlined and explicated are commonplace. The audience is able to correlate their experiences with the struggles of the characters in dire circumstances.
- The characters' struggles kindle emotions of pity and sympathy.

II. Chronicle Plays

The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 instilled nationalist feelings that propelled revisiting of history due to greater nationalist feelings. Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England*, in 1577 was referred by the English playwrights for producing dramas related to history. A chronicle refers to historical facts and a chronicle play deals with facts and incidents of historical and national importance rather than ordinary stories, legends, myths or fictitious events.

Features

- Either the life of a king or a person of national importance is the subject of the play.
- Both real and fictitious characters are featured. Minor episodes are invented by the dramatists and enmeshed within the canvas of the important events. Sometimes historical events are telescoped to suit the narrative.
- Common themes and storylines are related to ambition, responsibility towards the country, ascension to the throne, struggle for power and civil war.
- Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (1593), Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1591) and *Henry V* (1599) are history plays.

III. Masque

Masque was a form of courtly dramatic entertainment that originated in Italy, was popularised during the Stuart period and flourished in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Features

- The plot, usually taken from mythology was insignificant; however, it conveyed a message.
- Ladies and gentlemen of the courts of England were the principal characters that wore elaborate masks for the performance that involved a blend of poetry, music, song and dance.
- Elaborate stage decorations and extravagant costumes were produced for each play and the entire production was spectacular.
- Masques were an inevitable part of banquets, celebrations and coronations. Aristocrats and the nobility were the regular spectators. The masque concluded with the removal of the masks and danced with their partners amidst the audience.
- Ben Jonson wrote masques in the 17th century with stage design by the popular architect Inigo Jones. The noteworthy example of a masque in English is John Milton's *Comus* (1634).

Summary

Drama emerged as a form of enunciation to account for the changes in the society that were responsible for analysing artistic innovativeness down the ages. Each category of drama diverged into multiple forms that spread across the globe to usher a probably different outlook on the existing dramatic forms. Apart from the prominent dramatist, a host of other dramatists emerged that augmented the study of world literature. The ingenuity of each artist resulted in emergent forms of artistic creativity that compounded into variants and subcategories, unique and fascinating in their own ways. Theatre and drama, the exceptional twin forces etched figures in the minds of people that caught their sensibilities that stipulated profuse contributions of expressiveness in all the possible frontiers.
