

# D R A M A

Drama is the literary genre designed for being performed in the theatre. It usually takes the form of a play, which has a plot and characters just as fiction has. But, unlike fiction, a play revolves primarily around dialogue. Playwrights have only the actual words spoken by their characters through which to tell their story.

When a play is performed on stage, it receives a great deal of help from the interpretation of the producer (B. E.) or director (A. E.), from the skill of the actors, from the effectiveness of stage scenery, lighting, costumes and music.

You should never forget that drama has its own conventions, particularly with reference to time and place. For example, most plots would actually require a much longer period of time to develop than the few hours of the play.

Similarly the location for the action can rarely be the real one, since it takes place on a stage. As you can see, the aim of drama is not to recreate the world of nature but to offer a different model of our world.

Although watching a live performance is the best way of appreciating any play, we will try to understand them without necessarily see them performed.

## FEATURES OF A PLAY

Plays are dramatic works of varying length. They develop through the dialogue between the characters and their soliloquies, assisted by stage directions.

Plays are normally divided into major units called **Acts**, which are sometimes subdivided into **Scenes**. The main features of a play are:

- a) Stage Directions ;
- b) Dialogue ;
- c) Soliloquy and Monologue.

## Stage Directions

If you leaf through the text of a play, even without reading a single word you cannot fail to notice that parts of it are written in **italics**. This different print is traditionally used in plays to distinguish stage directions from dialogue. Stage directions are points in the text of a play where the dramatist openly intervenes to give instruction for its points. Stage directions can usually be found at the beginning of an Act to establish a setting and to portray the figures who will act in it.

Stage directions can:

- provide information about time and place;
- describe the scenery in detail;
- present the physical appearance of characters;
- illustrate characters' feelings, personality and relationship;
- indicate the tone of voice of an utterance;
- describe the movements and actions of the characters on stage;
- describe what happens or is heard on stage while the characters are silent;
- set the atmosphere of a scene;
- convey the playwright's comments.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is the technique which shows characters in interaction through what they say to one other building up plot. In drama we see actions taking place on the stage, but we learn the reason for such actions and their consequences mainly from what the characters say. Dialogue also advances the plot. The characters on stage vary in number as the play proceeds and this variation brings about fresh dialogue and new situations. The **plot** of a play can, in fact, be defined as the sequence of all the actions of all the characters, the reasons for these actions and their consequences. Three aspects of plot's construction are worth stressing:

- the passage of time;
- the arrangement of scene and situations;
- the relationship between the beginning and the end of a play.

The audience's sense of the passing of time is heavily dependent on dialogue. Although limited by the length of a play in performance, the audience can have access to past events, and be prepared for future ones, through the characters' speeches.

The order in which scenes and situations are arranged can build up a **climax** and raise or confound the audience's expectations.

The third important aspect of plot concerns its **denouement**, that is its final resolution; how far the situation, as the curtain falls, is similar or differs from the situation first established after the curtain rose, and the significance of the relationship between the beginning and the end of the play for its meaning.

Dialogue is, above all, what brings **characters** to life. A character's presence on stage is not in itself evidence of his or her importance in the story. This will depend on the part she or he plays in the dialogue. The way characters speak, reveals their personality and distinguishes them, one from the other. Only their words enable the audience to form a clear picture of what they are like and to judge whether the dramatist develops them coherently throughout the play. They can be based on **flat** (or stock) **characters**, i.e. conventional characters based on only one or two aspects of personality; or they can be **round characters** revealing all the qualities, faults and contradictions of real human beings.

Finally dialogue is used to convey comments about other characters. In this case you should compare what you have heard about them and their actual behavior when they appear on stage; thus you can find out whether the judgment made on them were accurate or merely the personal opinion of the characters who uttered them.

For quick reference, here is a list of the **functions of dialogue** in a play.

a) In relation to plot:

- it provides information necessary to understand what is happening on stage;
- it reports on past action and anticipates future ones;
- it raises expectations to what will come next.

b) In relation to characters:

- it shows the relationship between various characters;
- it reveals aspects of a character's personality through his or her own words or through someone else's words;
- it shows what a character thinks of another character.

## Soliloquy and Monologue

In theatrical language **soliloquy** means that a character speaks aloud to himself or herself. This does not necessarily imply that he or she is alone on the stage; other characters may be present but, if they are, it is assumed they do not hear the words of the soliloquy. A peculiar device, similar to soliloquy but usually limited to a short utterance, is called **aside**. It occurs when a character, engaged in a dialogue, speaks out his or her thoughts briefly but the words are not meant to be heard by anybody else on stage. This is a theatrical convention that the audience readily recognizes and accepts. Soliloquy fulfils a very important function in a play, in fact in it a character reveals his or her most private thoughts. Therefore it is a very convenient device for conveying directly to the audience information about the character's state of mind, feelings, motives, intentions including the deepest spiritual bewilderment and anguish. If the character addresses the audience, instead of talking to himself or herself, the soliloquy becomes something different, a sort of "public" speech.

Finally, soliloquy and monologue are terms often used interchangeably but there is one case where only the term **monologue** applies; this is when a character talks at length to others who listen to him or her without replying.

## FORMS OF DRAMA

You often find the terms **comedy** and **tragedy** applied to plays that you either read or watch on TV or see at the theatre. These terms define the two major forms of drama each one with distinctive features of its own. We shall now look at each form separately.

### Comedy

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word "comedy"? Probably laughter or, at least, light entertainment.

A typical definition of a comedy is a play in which the principal characters ordinarily begin in a state of opposition to one another or to their world (often both). By the end of the play, their opposition is replaced by harmony. This definition refers to a comedy's plot. It implies a radical denouement which is of benefit to the main character. Other characteristics of a comic plot are:

- a complex network of unfortunate or disastrous incidents which is eventually satisfactorily untangled;
- a story revolving round love or falling in love; - a happy ending involving one or more marriages;
- unlikely situations which can be exploited for comic effect (e.g.: situations based on deception, mistaken identity, intrigue, etc...).

The essence of comedy, at least in its modern sense, is, of course **humour**. Humour can take many forms on the stage from the subtly amusing to the hilarious. One major source for dramatic humour is comic speech. Humour may be **verbal** (based on language), **behavioral** (based on incongruous behavior by the characters) or **situational** (based on unusual situations). Another characteristic is that characters in a comedy tend to be "flat", with little depth of characterisation since what matters most is the action and the dialogue.

## Tragedy

What do you associate with the word "tragedy" ? Probably the feeling of unhappiness, the notion of pain and great suffering, and perhaps the idea of death. And you will, in fact, normally find all these elements in any play which goes under the name of tragedy.

In a tragedy, as in a comedy, there is a radical denouement, but this time it is to the disadvantage of the protagonist. This kind of development is typical of classical tragedy, which has been defined as a play where the hero and his world begin in a condition of harmony which disintegrates leaving him, by the end of the play, in a state of isolation. Unlike comic plots, tragic plots can be quite simple the central action is the fall of the protagonist from a condition of wealth and honour to degradation and humiliation. A tragic plot usually develops through various stages which include:

- **introduction** : the presentation of the hero;
- **development** : the hero's rise to power or prosperity;
- **climax** : the high point of the hero's fortunes;
- **crisis** : the turning point in the hero's fortunes;
- **decline** : deterioration in the hero's situation;
- **catastrophe** : the hero's fall and often death.

It should now be clear to you what the main features of comedy and tragedy are. Let us quickly recall them. In the case of **comedy** there is an initial situation of conflict and chaos and a harmonious conclusion; an elaborate plot; "flat" characters. In the case of **tragedy** there is an initial situation of harmony or prosperity and a conclusion involving disaster and, often, death; a simple and linear plot based on climax followed by catastrophe; one dominant central character, the tragic hero. Both comedy and tragedy are heavily dependent on their relationship with the audience to create amusement and laughter in the case of the former, and to arouse pity and horror in the case of the latter. You should not have much trouble in identifying these characteristics at least so far as pre twentieth-century plays. But there can be problems of identification with more recent drama; in fact quite a lot of modern plays do not fit neatly either category, although they may share some of the characteristics of both. Indeed you may find you want to call a modern play a **tragicomedy**.

## THE LANGUAGE OF DRAMA

Since a play is written to be spoken, it would be reasonable to expect its language to be naturalistic, that is to resemble closely the language of everyday speech. But does it? You need to bear in mind that the language of a play written in **verse** will almost certainly have some of the features of poetic language so that the language of a play written in **prose** must necessarily speak the language of everyday life. Also remember that it may be difficult for us to decide whether the language of a play written some time ago is naturalistic or not. The language of drama is never exactly the one used in real life, even when it attempts to get very close to it. However seemingly naturalistic, all dramatic language involves different degrees of refinement of actual conversations. Some dramatists, especially those writing in verse, may have chosen to use a poetic style of language, others may have chosen different stylized registers of prose. The choice is determined by a combination of factors, external to the text, which include:

- the literary conventions at the time the playwright lived and worked;
- the particular social situation or class of people represented in the play;
- the aim of the playwright in writing the play.