

WHAT IS DRAMA?

Drama is a literary form designed for the theater, where actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated action, and utter the written dialogue. In **poetic drama** the dialogue is written in verse (usually **blank verse** in English). Aristotle called drama "imitated human action." A **closet drama** is written in the form of a drama, but it is intended to be read rather than to be performed in the theater.

SOME ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

Professor J. M. Manly saw three necessary elements in **drama**: (1) a **STORY** (2) told in **ACTION** (3) by **ACTORS** who impersonate the **characters** of the **story**. This admits such forms as **pantomime**, so many critics insist that **dialogue** must be present in **drama**. Aristotle insisted on what is called the "**Three Unities**" -- one action, in one day in one locale. Even in Greek times, however, few plays conformed to this **convention**.

Although the drama is, as Aristotle asserted, an imitation of life, the stage and the printed page present physical difficulties for the making of such imitations. The various devices which have been employed as substitutions for reality and which the audience must accept as real although it knows them to be false are called **dramatic conventions**:

1. The actors on the stage must be taken as the persons of the story.
2. The stage must be regarded as the actual scene or geographical setting of the action.
3. The intervals between acts and scenes must be expanded imaginatively to correspond with the needs of the story.
4. The elaborate, poetic language must be accepted as spontaneous and natural -- soliloquies, asides, rhyming speeches, etc.
5. The details of costuming (disguises are impenetrable) and staging (visible ghosts, dinner table seating) must be accepted simultaneously as the actors and as the audience see them.
6. The staging devices of lighting, music, symbolic objects must be accepted within the context of the play, even though improbable in real life.

TERMS USED IN DISCUSSING DRAMA

- act:** A major division in the action of a play.
- dramatic notation:** An abbreviated form for indicating the location of lines from a play. Usually indicated in parathese after a quote, such as, "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (I, i, 1. 5-6).
- dramatis personae:** The characters, usually listed at the beginning of the play and described briefly.
- dramaturgy:** The art of writing plays.
- scene:** A sub-division of an act, in which there is usually no break in the continuity of time or place.
- staging devices:** Lighting, props, costumes, etc.

WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

There is a legend in Greek mythology of a magnificent bird which is born from fire and ashes. Ancient Greeks named the bird the phoenix. It is a strange conception: strength and life rising out of destruction. This conception was carried by the Greeks into an art form -- the tragic drama -- recognized as one of the most difficult yet enriching experiences of Western culture.

The subject of tragedy is the downfall of a hero, usually ending with his or her destruction or death. Readers or playgoers who submit themselves to tragedy share the emotions of the tragic characters. This emotional tension increases almost to the breaking point. Then, as the hero faces the final, horrible truth, the audience experiences a release, a release not granted to the hero of the play. This release is reminiscent of the phoenix, since from the ashes of devastating emotion there rises a feeling of calm, a sense of harmony in the universe. The Greeks called this emotional effect **catharsis**.

There are many theories about tragedy. Most of them stem from the work of the great Greek critic and philosopher Aristotle. He examined the Greek tragedies and described them in his *Poetics*, a book still widely read today. The following are a few of the statements that have been made about tragedy, and for which there is general agreement among critics.

1. Tragedy arouses the emotions of pity and fear, wonder and awe.

Readers watch the hero move toward destruction; they have pity for the hero; they share the hero's fear and suffering; they experience wonder and awe before the forces of Fate. The emotional impact of tragedy is two-pronged: (a) readers turn their thoughts inward to ponder their own fate; (b) readers are moved to consider momentarily the fate of all human beings.

2. A tragic hero must be a man or woman capable of great suffering.

Tragic heroes are often kings, queens, warriors, or persons of noble spirit and high position. They are not merely "upset" by small annoyances and misfortunes of life. They are larger than life. Thus, in the great suffering of unusually sensitive and noble persons, the reader can see more clearly the vast reaches of the human spirit.

3. Tragedy explores the question of the ways of God to mortals. We have always been disturbed about why God permits us to suffer, often (from a human point of view) so needlessly. Tragedy does not propose a solution to this problem. It presents the question in a dramatic form for us to contemplate.

4. Tragedy purifies the emotions. It purges the baser emotions so that the better ones shine forth. This is the doctrine of catharsis as formulated by Aristotle. Readers experience mounting anguish which builds to a peak like gathering flood waters. Suddenly they feel as if a flood gate has been opened, releasing the pent-up emotions, and in the place of the raging flood, flows a quiet, gentle stream. The point at which this happens in a tragedy is often the climax.

5. Tragedy shows how the hero is brought to disaster by a single flaw in character. Each person's nature is composed not only of the noble, the dignified and the godlike, but also of the base, the ignoble, the bestial. Tragedy shows us a person who has noble attributes, but whose character is marred by a flaw which ultimately leads to his downfall. This flaw is called **hamartia**.

Hamartia is a Greek word that is variously translated as error or frailty, tragic flaw, error of judgment, moral fault. The tragic hero ought to bring his misfortune upon himself, but he ought not really to deserve all the horrendous consequences. The word itself is derived from a term in archery, which means literally "a missing of the mark." This hamartia may be a moral sin or an intellectual mistake.

To determine whether or not a work you have read is a tragedy, you can look for certain specific things:

- ✓ A hero, or protagonist, who is basically noble and dignified, but who has a weakness, his hamartia, which brings about his own downfall.
- ✓ A hero who suffers greatly, but who suffers self-consciously, being aware of his plight and perhaps learning from it.
- ✓ A hero who struggles against his suffering and its causes, whether they come from outside or inside himself.
- ✓ A hero who confronts choice and perhaps makes the wrong choices because of his hamartia.

In each age the character of the tragic hero is influenced by that period's concepts of value. But to qualify as a tragic protagonist, the hero or heroine, whatever constitutes the criteria of the significance of the age, must be a person of high character and must face his or her destiny with courage and nobility of spirit.

- In Aristotelian tragedy, the hero must be better than other men, and this virtuous man must be brought from happiness to misery.
- In a period of monarchy, Shakespeare's protagonists were kings and rulers; in other ages they have been and will be other kinds of persons.
- In a democratic nation, founded on an egalitarian concept, a tragic hero can be the archetypal common citizen -- a worker, a police officer, a gangster, a New England farmer, a slave, a salesman.

If a generalization can be made about so protean a subject as tragedy, it is probably that tragedy treats human beings in terms of their godlike potential, of their transcendent ideals, of the part of themselves that is in rebellion against not only the implacable universe but the frailty of their own flesh and will. In this sense tragedy as the record of human strivings and aspirations is in contrast to comedy, which is the amusing spectacle of people's limitations and frailties.

WHAT IS COMEDY

Distinguishing between **comedy** and **tragedy** seems so obvious on the surface -- “Is the hero alive and well?” Must be a comedy. “Hero dead?” Tragedy. Yet Oedipus is still alive at the end of Sophocles’ play — and Aristotle considered *Oedipus Rex* the best example of a tragedy. Merely examining the **protagonist** is not always enough.

Comedy starts in **chaos** and ends in **union**, relying on intrigue and coincidence to assure that no matter how inevitable disaster may appear it is always avoided. Comedy must maintain a **tone of lightness** throughout, for if the audience begins to really fear for the characters, sympathy is engaged — humor is gone. There are mixtures of ups and downs, changes from ecstasy to despair in all lives -- this variation being so common that it is normal, not only to our lives, but also to our dramas. If **equilibrium** is restored, we have comedy; if not, tragedy. Whatever the disturbance or **conflict** in a Greek, Roman, or Shakespearean comedy, all’s well that ends well before the curtain falls. “All losses are restored and all sorrows end” except, of course, for the villain. But even he, though discomfited, is frequently offered the opportunity to redeem himself if he hasn’t already. All is forgiven, the community is restored, families are reconciled, lovers get married, and everyone lives happily ever after.

In general, the comic effect arises from a recognition of some **incongruity** of speech, action, or character revelation. The incongruity may be merely verbal as in the case of a play on words or an exaggerated boast or it may involve ludicrous situations or contradictory characters -- the dumb blonde or the emperor’s non-existent new clothes. Since comedy aims primarily to amuse and to provoke smiles and laughter, language, too, is different; wit and humor are utilized, rather than grand poetry and the “mighty line.”

Characters are often **flat** and **stereotyped**, rather than **round** and **individualized**. Comic characters are usually middle class and clearly separated into groups of “good guys and bad guys;” whereas tragic characters are usually noble and may incorporate both good and bad within themselves. Comedy will also depend heavily on **stock characters**, such as the *miles gloriosus*, the *senex amans*, the **clever slave**, etc.

Viewed in another sense, **comedy** may be considered to deal with people in their human state, restrained and often made ridiculous by their limitations, faults, bodily functions, and animal nature. By contrast, **tragedy** may be considered to deal with people in their ideal godlike state. Comedy has always viewed human beings more realistically than tragedy, and drawn its laughter or its **satire** from the spectacle of human weakness or failure; hence its tendency to juxtapose appearance and reality, to deflate pretense, and to mock excess. In summary:

1. Comedy occurs when characters and situations are exaggerated, when incongruous elements are paired, or when the unexpected takes place.

Melodramas wherein the villain evicts a starving family are humorous only if exaggerated there is a vast difference between “The Perils of Pauline” and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

2. Comedy occurs when man is presented as unheroic. The coward who pretends to be brave or the beggar pretending to be a king are comic figures so long as they remain ludicrous. Dealt with seriously, they can turn pathetic or tragic.

3. Comedy arises out of the limitations which nature places upon man. Man has vision and aspiration. He would be like the gods and float in intellectual and spiritual realms daring any adversary; but man is subject to the demands of the body. The speaker at a political rally who cannot control his belching is comic no matter how grand his words.

4. Comedy is escape and evasion. There is a running away from life in the sense that the crushing elements of pain and suffering are trivialized to something safe -- a pie in the face -- or magically avoided at the end by *deus ex machina*.

WHAT ARE OTHER KINDS OF DRAMA?

Strictly speaking, many critics consider there to be only two kinds -- *comedy* and **tragedy** — and consider all other plays to be sub-types. Yet there are several terms which are useful in discussing other kinds of plays, regardless of the controversy. Two especially important ones are:

Melodrama: A play constructed with too many ups and downs. Characters are too one-dimensional, bearing little relationship with each other or acting without motivation. Situations are highly impossible; solutions are incredible or conflicts are over-emphasized. (Most television serials whether situation comedies or dramatic series fall in this category).

Tragicomedy: A play containing many humorous scenes but which ends tragically. Like melodrama, the ending seems inconsistent with the world we know or even with the reality of the play.

Sometimes special terms are used to describe plays on the basis of staging, content, or some such specific characteristic. For example, **pantomime** is a wordless play, but it could be either “tragic” or “comic.” This is a staging distinction. **Comedy of Manners** is a play which ridicules the relations and intrigues of high-society characters, often relying on violations of decorum and manner for its humor. This is a content and a style distinction. Some other specialized types include:

Commedia dell’Arte: Street comedy

Farce: A comedy in which the predominating elements are action, plot, and outright exaggeration.

Masque: Light poetical and musical entertainment in which spectacle of costume or background predominate; court drama popular during the Elizabethan era.

Medieval Drama

Mystery Plays: Scriptural events.

Miracle Plays: Legends of saints.

Morality Plays: Virtues personified; allegorical

Passion Plays: Story of Christ’s crucifixion.

WHAT TO SAY ABOUT A PLAY?

Characters

1. Who is the protagonist or main character?
What are his or her main character traits?
His or her chief weaknesses and virtues?
2. What are the special functions of the other characters?
Do any of them serve as a blocking character for the protagonist?
Do any of them serve as a foil for the character of the protagonist?
Do any of them serve as a special vehicle for the author's own comments?
3. Who is the antagonist, if there is one?
Is he a complex character, a mixture of bad and good?
Is he a stereotypic villain?
4. If the play is a tragedy, what is the main character's "tragic flaw" or weakness?
Is it a moral defect? an error in judgment? Is it purely the result of fate?
Is he of sufficient nobility of character, no matter what his social position is, to win our admiration and sympathy in spite of his shortcomings?
5. What means does the playwright use to characterize?
Stage direction? Self-revelation by monologue or conversation?
Actions? Comments by other characters? Characteristic habits?
6. Does the playwright try to create his characters in depth or does he merely give one of two facets of them?
Are there type or stock characters in the play?
7. Do characters change? Does this growth occur logically?
Do they change through self-knowledge? revelation? outside force?

Plot

1. What are the main elements of the plot?
Into how many "chapters of action" is it divided, regardless of the act division?
2. How does the opening set the stage for the remainder of the play?
3. What brings on the dramatic conflict?
4. Is the progress of the action clear or confused?
5. Are the incidents well and plausibly connected?
Is there sufficient causation supplied?
6. Is the resolution sufficiently inevitable, or is the denouement brought about by arbitrary coincidence?
7. Is there dramatic irony present? To what degree?
What does it achieve in each case?

Setting

1. What is the setting? Does it change?
2. How does the setting contribute to the theme and characterization?
3. Is the particular setting important to the play?

Theme

1. What is the moral or human significance of the play?
2. Does the play stimulate thought about any important problems of life?
3. Does the play supply “answers” by implication or direct statement?
4. Does the play clearly reveal any overall view of the universe on the part of the dramatist? Is his view sentimental, romantic, Christian humanist, cynical, etc.?

Language

1. If verse, what kind? Is the dramatist hampered by his verse forms?
2. Is the language elevated, or close to that of real life? Is it swollen, bombastic, stilted, artificial?
3. Does it contribute significantly to enjoyment of the play?
4. Is the language used by each character specially adapted to him, used to help characterize him?
5. Do any images dominate the play’s figurative language?
If so, how do they affect the play’s atmosphere and tone?
6. Do any particular speeches, or even recurring phrases or words, stand out as crucial in the play?

General

1. Does the author observe the unities of time, place, and action?
Does his play gain or lose by the unities he observes?
2. Does the author observe any special dramatic conventions? What ones?
3. Is any particular background information necessary in order to appreciate the play?
4. Does the play conform to the conventions of its type? or strain against the conventions?

Screenplay Format

The Hustler

FADE IN.

A summer afternoon in a small American town. We see an old Packard coupe driving down the dusty main street. The car pulls into a service station. Two men emerge from the car. One is a thin balding fellow in his late 40's (CHARLIE BURNS). The other man (EDDIE FELSON) is much younger. He is short, but muscular and very good-looking. The older man walks away from the car toward a bar across the street. The young man remains by the car as an ATTENDANT approaches.

ATTENDANT: Yes, sir?

EDDIE (*Pointing to the front wheels of the car.*): I think I got a little breach in this lining here.

ATTENDANT: Oh yeah. Well, it will take me about thirty minutes to check it. You want me to fill her up too?

EDDIE: Yeah. You better check the oil, too. (*He turns and crosses the street, heading for the bar.*)

DISSOLVE.

Now we see the inside of the bar. It is a dimly lit room, with four large pool tables in the center. . . .

One-Act Play Format

A Marriage Proposal

CHARACTERS: Stepan Stepanovitch Tschubukov, a country farmer
 Natalia Stepanova, his daughter (aged 25)
 Ivan Vassiliyitch Lomov, Tshubukov's neighbor

SCENE: Reception-room in TSCHUBUKOV's country home,
 Russia

TIME: The present.

TSCHUBUKOV discovered as the curtain rises. Enter LOMOV, wearing a dress-suit.

TSCHUB. (*Going toward him and greeting him.*): Who is this I see? My dear fellow! Ivan Vassiliyitch! I'm so glad to see you! (*Shakes hands.*) But this is a surprise! How are you?

LOMOV: Thank you. And how are you?

TSCHUB.: Oh, so-so, my friend. Please sit down. It isn't right to forget one's neighbor. But tell me, . . .

Television-Play Format

Requiem for a Heavyweight

(We open on a long angle shot looking down a bare cement corridor dimly lit by intermittent green-shaded 25-watt bulbs. This is the underbelly of a fight arena and from off stage comes the occasional roar of the crowd. . . .)

ARMY: How about it, Mount, can yuh make it? Make it okay?

(The fighter nods, wets his lips as if to say something, and then can't get it out. Over their shoulder we see MAISH, the manager, coming down the corridor. A MAN steps out from the wall and detains him.)

MAISH *(Calls out to ARMY)*: Army, stay there with him for a minute, will you? I'll be right there.

(The camera moves over for a close shot of MAISH and the MAN.)

MAN: Two words, Maish. Cough up.

MAISH *(Furtive look toward ARMY and the fighter.)*: Will you relax? I'll get it. I'll get it. Tell him I'll get it. Tell him to phone me.

MAN: Mr. Henson's no collection agency.

MAISH: I know. I know. Tell him he'll get it.

(With this the camera moves away leaving them talking in low unintelligible voices. . . .)

Radio-Play Format

Sorry, Wrong Number

(SOUND: Number being dialed on phone; busy signal.)

MRS. STEVENSON *(a querulous, self-centered neurotic)*: Oh—dear! *(Slams down receiver. Dials OPERATOR.)*

OPERATOR: Your call, please?

MRS. STEVENSON: Operator? I've been dialing Murray Hill 4-0098 now for the last three-quarters of an hour, and the line is always busy. But I don't see how it **could** be busy that long. Will you try it for me, please?

OPERATOR: Murray Hill 4-0098? One moment, please.

MRS. STEVENSON: I don't see how it could be busy all this time. It's my husband's office. He's working late tonight, and I'm all alone here in the house. My health is very poor—and I've been feeling nervous all day—

OPERATOR: Ringing Murray Hill 4-0098.

(SOUND: Phone buzz. It rings three times. Receiver is picked up at the other end.)

MAN: Hello?

MRS. STEVENSON: Hello? *(A little puzzled.)* Hello, is Mr. Stevenson there?

MAN *(into phone as though he had not heard)*: Hello. *(Louder.)* Hello?