

Chapter 10

The Story of English Drama

Introduction:

The word 'Drama' comes from a Greek word meaning "thing done". And the things it does, as with acting, create a world apart- a world modelled on ours. The two words- drama and play are synonymous but in our country, the word drama is more popular than the word play.

Drama is not solely a form of literature; it is at once literary art and representational art. As literary art play is made of words.

Dramatic elements

- plot
- character
- dialogue
- gestures
- scenic effects
- music
- soliloquy

The function of words, or of literary elements in drama will vary. In some plays the, actors are of first importance and the words play a negligible part. In other plays, the words are of primary importance, as in some of G.B. Shaw's plays. The words used in a drama may be either verse or prose but whichever form is employed, the general purpose of the drama must be served. It has a plot, character and dialogue. In a play characters appear and events happen without any intermediate comment or explanation. Drama, then, offers us a direct presentation of its imaginative reality. In this sense it is a representational art. It is also a composite art. It cannot be comprehended and enjoyed without the help of some external accessories. It is designed for performance on the stage and not for personal perusal. It is designed for representations by actors who impersonate its different characters.

Drama thrives on the art of self-detachment. A good dramatist like Shakespeare treats his character with God-like impartiality. In a drama the different parts of plot or of what we generally call the dramatic structure are known as **exposition, complication, crisis, denouement** and **catastrophe** (in a tragedy) or **conclusion** (in a comedy). So far as the art of characterization is concerned, the dramatist has no alternative but to make his characters reveal themselves through speech and action.

Dramatic Structure

- Exposition (or initial incident)
- Complication (or rising action)
- Crisis (or turning point)
- Denouement (or falling action)
- Catastrophe (in a tragedy)
- Conclusion (in a comedy)

Parallelism is an outstanding feature of dramatic design and appears in the form of the reduplication of motives, interest and themes. The principle of contrast is equally important. The contrast is inherent in the very nature of the conflict which is the backbone of drama.

There are different types of drama. In a **tragedy**, the conflict terminates in a catastrophe while a **comedy** leads to a happy conclusion. **Tragi-comedy** is both tragedy and comedy. **Farce** means a dramatic work designed solely to excite laughter. Melodrama is to tragedy what farce is to comedy. The masque is a form of dramatic entertainment which involves dances and disguises and in which the spectacular and musical elements predominate over plot and character.

Types of Drama

- Tragedy
- Comedy
- Tragi-comedy
- Farce
- Melodrama
- Masque
- One Act play

Story of Drama:

The story of English drama takes us back to the century succeeding the coming of the Normans. The religious plays appeared in England soon after the Norman Conquest.

These sacred plays were known as **Miracle Plays** or **Mysteries**. Their purpose was directly didactic. The earliest **Miracle** in England was *Ludus de Sancta Kathurian* which was performed about the year 1110. These **Miracle** plays – increased steadily in number and in popularity. By the years 1300 the Miracles went out of ecclesiastical hands. They were adopted eagerly by the trade guilds. They were under the general control of the council of the town. By the beginning of the fourteenth century all these plays were in various localities of England.

In the later Middle Ages developed another kind of dramatic literature, known as **Morality Plays** in which the characters were virtues personified such as *Beauty, Strength, Gluttony* and *Peace*. The Moralities were in existence as back as Henry VI's time (1422-71). Among the famous Morality plays are the *Marriage of Wit and Wisdom, Everyone, The Four Elements, The Trial of Treasure* and the *Pride of Life*. What is known as **Interlude** was also a late product of the dramatic development of the Morality Play. It flourished about the middle of the sixteenth century. John Heywood was the most famous writer of Interludes. Besides the **Miracle Plays** and **Interludes** there were several folk plays of several kinds.

These early experiments in play writing are of great importance because they provided a kind of training School for English dramatic genius and did much to prepare the way for the development of artistic drama which flourished during the Renaissance period.

During the period, there was a great revival of interest in Latin literature. English writers went back to the classics for inspiration and example in drama and in other fields of literary enterprise. They learned many valuable lessons in the principles of dramatic construction and technique. The first real comedy entitled *Roister Doister* was written about 1550 by Nicholas Udall.

The classical influence upon tragedy was greater. It was under the influence of Seneca that the first English tragedy entitled *Gorboduc* was written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. The quarter century which followed the production of *Gorboduc* was a period of great confusion. In the end, the romantic form of drama was established by Shakespeare's immediate predecessors who were known as the University Wits. Arranged roughly in order of time they were John Lily, Thomas Kyd, George Peele, Robert Greene and Christopher Marlowe. Among these dramatists an important position will be assigned to Marlowe. William Shakespeare collaborated with him and was profoundly influenced by him.

To the public theatre of the sixteenth century came William Shakespeare (1564-1616) as actor, playwright and shareholder in theatrical undertakings. His dramas are a great river of life and beauty. They can broadly be put under seven groups - the Early comedies, the English histories, the mature comedies and the Roman plays. The great

tragedies of Shakespeare are **Hamlet**, **Othello**, **Macbeth**, **Julius Caesar** and **King Lear**. In the plays of Shakespeare, Man occupied the center of creation. He enjoyed free-will and became responsible for his destiny to a greater extent. This was in keeping with the Renaissance spirit, which reacted against the Medieval fatalism. In intensity of emotion, depth and power of style these tragedies stand supreme and achieve the high water mark of Shakespearean excellence.



William Shakespeare

English drama reached the highest point in the decade following Elizabeth's death in 1603. Queen Elizabeth reigned from 1558 to 1603 and her successor James I from 1603 to 1625. Thereafter we find the dawn of Jacobean age which covers roughly the period that follows Shakespeare. The Jacobean drama lost the optimistic and nationalistic temper of the early Elizabethan drama. Ben Jonson (1573- 1637) was a learned scholar and the greatest contemporary of Shakespeare. George Chapman, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, and John Webster were other Jacobean playwrights who had enriched the Jacobean dramatic literature by their contributions.

With the restoration of Charles II in the year 1660, all the theatres were reopened in England. Actually the break between 1642 and 1660 was not complete for entertainment of one kind or another had continued. Nor were the older writers forgotten. It was in comedy that the Restoration found its peculiar excellence. The comedies of the Restoration age were varied, but it was in the works of three writers - Etherege Wycherley and Congreve - that the one distinctive type, **the comedy of manners** was evolved.

The drama of the eighteenth century did not reach the same high level as the novel. Only Goldsmith and Sheridan made permanent contributions to the English stage. The Licensing Act of 1737 restricted the freedom of expression by dramatists and drove a number of good men out of the theatre.

The drama of the early nineteenth century was on the whole deplorable. The prosperous middle class society had no genuine appreciation of drama as an art.

The twentieth century showed a talent with which the nineteenth century could not compete. H. Granville Barker and Vedrenne produced season plays at the Court Theatre which brought an enlightenment into production and a discipline into acting. The twentieth century produced a galaxy of distinguished dramatists. John Galsworthy based his plays on social problems. His success with audiences in the theatre began with **Strife** (1909) and **Justice** (1910). Another great dramatist was George Bernard Shaw whose career was the longest in English dramatic history beginning with **Widowers' Houses**. T.S. Eliot revived the tradition of verse drama in the twentieth century. His important plays are **Murder**

in the *Cathedral*, *Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, and the *Confidential Clerk*.

Christopher Fry also achieved success with verse drama like *Lady's Not for Burning* in plays which captured London audiences. The theatre had suffered a lot with the war and in 1940 Hitler contrived to do what even Puritans had failed to achieve by closing the London theatre. The major theatrical adventure of the post war was the establishment of a Company of the Royal Court Theatre. To the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 came John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* which caught the imagination of a generation.



G. B. Shaw

Samuel Beckett, an Irishman gave a philosophical dimension to world drama through his *Waiting for Godot*. He portrayed the incoherence and meaningfulness of human life. Harold Pinter, an actor himself, was influenced by Beckett and wrote many plays. His *The Homecoming* presents a picture of broken family ties. Arnold Wesker's plays are influenced by socialism and they portray race, class and the problems of human relationship in our age.



T. S. Eliot

American Drama:

There is a rich tradition of drama in the USA. Eugene O' Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams have presented the vital aspects of the American society in their plays. O' Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, *Anna Christie*, *Desire Under the Elms* and *The Iceman Cometh* have psychological insight into man's personality. Arthur Miller's *All my Sons* and *Death of Salesman* also probes the inner life of the characters. Tennessee William's plays evaluate the impact of the American dream on the identity of his characters.



Samuel Beckett

African Drama:

Many dramatists from Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa have written plays in English. Wole Soyinka who belongs to the Yorubu tribe has experimented with the English language and dramatic techniques in his plays. He resents

modern civil violence and believes in a sense of justice and universal brotherhood of man. His *A Dance of Forest* and *The Lion and the Jewel* have been very successful on the stage.

Indian Drama:

In India there has been a long tradition of writing plays in English. Asif Currimbhoy has written many plays and has won acclaim by his *The Tourist Mecca*. Rabindranath Tagore translated many of his Bengali plays into English himself. His *Chitra* and *Red Oleander* have been popular with the audience. Similarly Girish Karnad, the great Kannada actor, director and playwright has translated his plays into English, too. His *Hayavadana* and *Tughlaq* have also been successful all over India on the stage in their English version.



Rabindranath Tagore

Exercises

1. Complete the statements given below:

- The word 'drama' comes from
- The word drama means
- Drama offers us a of its imaginative reality.
- In a tragedy the conflict terminates in
- The purpose of the Miracle plays was
- In Morality plays, the characters were
- Roister Doister** is the first
- The first English tragedy is
- In the plays of Shakespeare man occupied
- T.S. Eliot revived in the twentieth century.
- Tughlaq** is written by

2. Answer these questions very briefly:

- Write the names of dramatic elements.
- What are the dramatic structures of a tragedy?
- What is parallelism?
- What is a Farce?
- What is a masque?
- Write any five types of drama.
- Who were known as the University wits? Write their names.
- In which Age was the Comedy of manners written?