

Drama as a Form

Drama is an art form that tells a story through the speech and actions of the characters in the story. Drama is performed by actors who impersonate the characters before an audience

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), the father of western criticism classified poetry into three kinds- the dramatic, the epic (narrative) and the lyrical. According to Aristotle, dramatic form was the greatest form of literature.

The term drama is derived from the Greek verb “dran” which means “to act”, “to do”, “to perform”. Persons in real life play the part of men created by the dramatist and it is generally defined as, “a narrative in dramatic form meant for a theatrical performance by actors”.

Definitions of Drama:

“A play is a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours and the changes of fortunes to which it is subject for the delight and instruction of mankind”.

-John Dryden

“A poem written for representation”.

Dr. Johnson

“A composition in prose or poetry, accommodated to action and intended to exhibit a picture of human life or to depict a series of grave or humourous actions of more than ordinary interest, tending towards some striking result. It is commonly designed to be spoken and represented b actors on the stage.

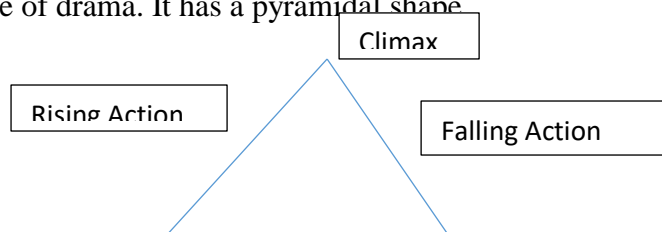
What Aristotle says about tragedy naturally holds good as the definition of drama – especially the opening part- “is an imitation of an action”.

Drama is a composite art, in which the author, the actor, and the stage manager all combine to produce the total effect. Unlike the novel, therefore, it cannot be enjoyed without recourse to any external accessory.

Drama gets most of its effectiveness from its ability to give order and clarity to human experiences. The basic elements of drama, feelings, desires, conflicts and reconciliation are the major ingredients of human experience. In real life, these emotional experiences often seem to be a jumble of unrelated impressions. In drama however, the playwright can organize these experiences into understandable patterns. The audience sees the material of the real life presented in meaningful form with the unimportant omitted and the significant emphasized.

The Structure of Drama:

Gustav Freytag in his book *Technique of the Drama* (1863) has given the basic structure of drama. It has a pyramidal shape



Exposition

Denouement

All plays employ the same basic structure of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement. All plays set forth a problem or a conflict. In a tragedy the theme is dark and serious; in comedy it is light and gay promising a happy ending. But the above structure is the same in both cases. A play requires an exposition to explain the circumstances or situation from which the action is to take its course; a complication or rising action during which it progresses or grows more involved; a climax (or crisis), when it takes a turn for the better or worse (according as the play is comedy or tragedy); a falling action which unravels the complication and a denouement or catastrophe (in a tragedy) that decides the fate of its characters. In a five-act play the exposition occupies the first act or so; rising action the second act and a part of the third; climax a part of the third; falling action remaining part of the third and the fourth act and the denouement or the catastrophe the fifth act. In shorter plays each phase is proportionately reduced.

The typical Elizabethan drama, following the Senecan tragedy was divided into five acts each comprising a number of scenes. The stage being simple- a mere platform and the stage contrivances but few, the scenes followed each other in quick succession, changes being indicated only by a notice on a board. Elaborate scenery and costumes came very much later and made possible some splendid productions of famous plays.

Major Constituents or Elements of Drama

Plot, Characterisation, Dialogue, Setting, Stage-directions, Conflict etc. are the elements of drama. Most of these are also applicable for the novel also. While novel is in the narrative form, drama is in the form of action. The novel usually does not have any limits of length but a drama has to deliver its message in the limited span of a few hours. Thus there is a great economy in the handling of the plot and the delineation of the characters. The novelist does not depend on anyone else for the final effect of his work. But a dramatist has depend on the actor, the stage manager and many others for the effect. The dramatist does not address his audience directly like the novelist; he cannot interrupt the story and come forward to explain his purpose. Though dramatists like Shaw and Galsworthy put forth their views with great force, they do so only through some mouthpiece but never in their own person.

1. Plot:

A plot is the organization of events and incidents, episodes and situations into a coherent, convincing structure and it is rendered towards achieving particular emotional and artistic effects. A plot takes into account the nature of characters, the way in which events are related to each other and their dramatic effect. In fact, plot is more than a sequence of events. In the plot little irrelevances of real life are omitted and some particular events of special character are placed forcefully and conveyed to us by the use of realistic dialogue and exciting action on the stage.

Plot deals with a conflict. Conflict means some kind of a struggle or competition. It is the conflict that makes the drama appealing. No conflict, no drama. Unless there is conflict, there is no effective attraction for readers. The conflict can be of one or more types. It may be between two persons, thoughts, ideas. It may be internal or external, physical, intellectual or psychological. Drama by its very nature intensely and artistically expresses these conflicts. The most decisive conflict is the one when an individual has to choose between two versions

of right action; it is the most painful and trying experience for him. Drama represents conflict in all its diversity and from a variety of perspectives. Conflict can be both, external and internal. (External- between two characters and internal- within the mind of the protagonist)

Plot has to do with internal relations of events or the way incidents are combined or unified to produce an 'organic whole'. The events have to be formed in to a plot. It is also narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. Plots could be infinite or limitless but their significance has no limits and that is why Aristotle says that "Plot is the soul of tragedy". According to Aristotle action in drama is complete in itself. It has a beginning, a middle and an end.

According to Aristotle plots are of two kinds- simple and complex. When the action proceeds as a continuous whole and change in the fortune of the central character takes place without Peripeteia (reversal of situation) or without Anagnorisis ((recognition), we have a simple plot i.e. the action moves forward uniformly without any violent change. When such a change in fortune takes place by involving reversal or recognition or both, we have a complex plot. Simple plot has no side issues to complicate the process of discovery. In a complex plot there is a central theme with a subordinate theme or several subordinate themes. On a whole, comic plots are more elaborate than tragic plots. The central theme comprises the main plot while the subordinate themes comprise the subplot/s.

Characteristics of a Good Plot:

1) Clarity: The plot of a play should be very clear so that the audience has no difficulty in following it at the necessary speed.

2) Closely Constructed: The plot should be closely constructed so that no time is wasted. The events follow one another in credible sequence.

3) Logical Connection: The chain of events should be interlocked. There should be logical link between the events. It should not look like a string of beads threaded at random. Generally the events of the plot follow the first event of the play naturally.

4) Interesting Plot Development: A plot must be simple and speedy. It must have twists and turns to keep interest until the end. It must develop from one crisis to another. (Here crisis does not mean necessarily alarming or distressing, but merely a crisis of interest, an important event).

5) Sense of Completeness/ Artistic Wholeness: It must be a complete whole with a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning of a plot is the incident which initiates a process of change and the process coincides with the end of the story. The middle follows the beginning/ what has gone and is followed by the catastrophe or the solution, and means everything between the first and the last incident. The end follows the middle and is a consequence of the previous crisis. But nothing follows the end. The artistic whole implies the logical linkup of the various incidents, events, and situations that form the plot.

6) Adequate Magnitude: The plot should neither be too small, nor too long. It should be long enough to allow the process of change initiated by the beginning. It should be properly and completely developed but not too long for memory to remember. If it is too long the beginning will be forgotten before the end. If it is too small its different parts will not be easily distinguishable from one another.

Many plays have the main plot and a subplot or occasionally two parallel plots of approximately equal importance. They complicate the action further, add interest or give relief.

The main plot focusses on the hero or the protagonist and the subplot on another set of characters or events. This might seem to complicate matters, but in fact the subplot usually illuminates the main plot. Comic subplots are common in tragedy. They suggest an alternative way of looking at the predicament.

2. Characters:

The agents that carry forward the plot are called characters. Characterisation is thus an important constituent of a play after the plot. Aristotle calls it 'ethos', a set of moral qualities. We assess characters on the basis of what they say and do and what other characters say about them. We understand them in the real sense when we relate them to the broader themes of the play.

The meaning of the play is not stated directly by the dramatist; it is implicit in the action and characterisation. Aristotle's concept and modern concept of character are two different things. Aristotle belonged to the classical age in which community was at the centre, not the individual. But today we think of character as not only a distinct personality but also as a man with a certain psychological depth, motivation, attitudes and a general emotional disposition. The concept of character has undergone many changes. The main character is called the "hero" or the "protagonist". The hero does not mean someone who is brave or noble. Heroes may be good or evil, low or high born. Often opposing the hero is the villain or antagonist, although sometimes, as in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* the hero himself can be villain. The evil deeds of the villain disrupt the social order.

Types of Characters:

1) Dynamic and Static: A person learns from experience, gains in the understanding of the world and becomes mature. Whatever the final outcome be such a character would be called dynamic as against the static, the one that continues to cherish the initial qualities.

2) Flat and Round: E.M. Forster, the well-known novelist and critic in his "Aspects of the Novel" distinguishes between flat and round characters. According to him, flat character is informed by a 'single idea or quality and has no individualizing details. The round character on the other hand is too much complete and has a particularity and intricate motivation. In traditional criticism flat were called 'types'.

3) Major and Minor: The persons in drama or a narrative on whom the action is centred are the major characters. Minor characters are relatively unimportant but they also have a well-defined dramatic function. In Shakespeare, many a time, the minor characters convey the author's criticism of life.

In a drama, the delineation of a character is done through the words of the character himself, his actions speak for his nature, the description by other characters and the character's asides and soliloquies.

3. Diction: It means the expression of the meaning in words. It is the exchange of words between the characters in a tragedy. Commonly known as dialogue, it carries the action forward in the form of verse or prose and holds a mirror up to what the dramatist attempts to express. It unfolds the relations between characters. Soliloquies and asides also form an important part of dramatic speech and help in understanding of the characters.

4. Setting: It is the general locale and the historical time in which the action occurs. The setting of an episode or scene within a work is the particular physical location in which it takes place. e.g. The general setting in *Macbeth* is medieval Scotland and the setting of Macbeth's encounter with the witches is a blasted heath. The physical setting is an important

element which generates the atmosphere of a work. When applied to theatrical production, setting also means the properties or the movable pieces of furniture on the stage. Sometimes it even includes the positioning of the actors in a particular scene.

5. Stage directions: They are guidelines, suggestions given by the dramatist usually to the producer, in the script of the play. In earlier drama, they were simple and few in number. They establish a link between the reader and the dramatist. Usually this function was performed by the Chorus in the Greek drama. In modern plays the stage directions are many, complex and given in detail. They help the dramatist to create the exact atmosphere.

6. Conflict: It means some kind of struggle or competition. Without a conflict, there cannot be a drama. Conflict is of two types- external and internal. It could be between two persons, thoughts or ideas. It could be physical, psychological or Intellectual. Hegel in his discussion on tragedy points out that the most decisive conflict that lends grandeur to the human life is articulated when an individual has to choose between two versions of right action, the most painful and trying experience for him. Drama represents conflict in all its diversity and from a variety of perspectives. Shakespeare seems to prefer internal conflict to external one, though there are many scenes of external conflict in his tragedies. In modern absurd drama, the conflict centres round the philosophical belief that life is meaningful and the experience that such meaning does not really exist.

7. Chorus: It was an important constituent of the Greek drama and consisted of fifty persons. It has an interpretative function and is in fact a commentator. In a Greek tragedy, this body of persons formed, as it were, a multiple individuality, moving, dancing, and singing together and continually interrupting the dialogue and the progress of the action with its odes and interludes. "To combine, to harmonize, to deepen for the spectator the feelings excited in him by the sight of what was passing on the stage"- this was one of the grand effects produced by the chorus in Greek tragedy. It also served the purpose of a narrator or a commentator. The actions that happen off-stage, especially, acts of violence, war etc. are narrated by the chorus.

8. Thought: It is the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances.

9. Song: It held the chief position among embellishments in Greek tragedy.

10. Spectacle: It has an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all parts, it is the least artistic. The spectacular effects do not depend on the art of the poet but on the stage mechanism.