

Types of Drama

Types of tragedy:

1. Classical or Greek tragedy: Aristotle's Poetics is based on the analysis of the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Hence, the characteristics of Greek tragedy are well stated in the Poetics. The stories in these tragedies being based on myths were known to the audience. Hence, there was little element of surprise in them. As part of the religious festivals, there was a strong religious and moral element in the plays. Fate (nemesis) was supreme. The Greek tragedy, as far as possible, avoided scenes of brutal violence on the stage, though the subjects were often shocking and terrible. There were as few as five to six characters in the play. Such incidents were narrated by the chorus which was fifty men strong. The characters, usually the protagonist belonged to a high social order; a man with exceptional character but with a flaw which led to his downfall. Women and slaves were not considered fit subjects for a tragedy. The tragedies were 'pure tragedies' and there was no mixing of the comic with the tragic, thus following the Unity of Action. Greek tragedies were performed as trilogies; a series of three plays. But after serious plays usually there would be a 'Satyr play' which was separate from the tragedy and often crudely comic in nature.

2. Renaissance/ Elizabethan Tragedy: Renaissance or revival of art came to England in the middle of the sixteenth century which is slightly late than in other European countries. Due to Renaissance, there was an increase in classical translations which along with the English medieval tradition of Mysteries and Morality plays fired the imagination of English dramatists. The influence of the Roman dramatist Seneca is most important in the field of tragedy. The Senecan techniques like division into five acts, elaborate, flowery language, the theme of revenge, magic, ghosts etc. were freely borrowed by the Renaissance dramatists. Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe among the University Wits paved the way for Shakespeare, Webster, Tourneur and others in the field of tragedy. Unlike the Greeks, the Renaissance dramatists did show violent scenes on the stage. Shakespeare is the most prominent dramatist of this period. Though Shakespeare conformed to the substance of the Greek tragedy, he did make changes in the form and characterization. The tragic hero has a driving passion or obsession which becomes his tragic flaw in the peculiar circumstances. Instead of destiny having the upper hand, Character is destined in Shakespeare though there is some role for destiny in the form of co-incidences, chance in his ultimate fall. Whereas external conflict and horror became popular due to Senecan influence, the conflict in Shakespeare was much internalized. Webster included both, internal as well as external conflict in his plays. Tragedies of the period were written in blank verse and on persons of eminence, historical figures etc. Ghosts, witches, murders were frequently used in the horror tragedies of Thomas Kyd (*Hieronemo, The Spanish Tragedy*) and Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi, The White Devil*) under Senecan influence.

3. The Restoration Tragedy/ The Heroic Play: The Heroic play is a peculiar product of the Restoration period (1660-1700). It was often criticized as unnatural, artificial and alien. It came into existence in response to the spiritual needs of a tired, disillusioned and decadent aristocracy. It created a dream-world with love, virtue and greatness in contrast to the debased life in reality of the times. It dealt with the themes of love and honour or duty. It is an artificial world which can be best termed as 'heroic' for the protagonist and his belief in his absolute power over his actions and surroundings. The Heroic play shows more affinity with the epic with its character, with its style, especially the use of heroic metre. The plot, the characters, the wit, the passions, the descriptions are all exalted and epical in style. Love and valour are the themes of a heroic play. The audience is amazed by the superhuman devotion and loyalty shown by the hero. To this love is linked the theme of honour, which includes all spiritual and moral qualities and the hero strives to possess them to be worthy of his beloved. The Heroic play shows complications such as two men loving the same woman, or two brothers or two friends. These lead to sudden turns in the fortune of the hero. The Heroic play usually ended on a happy note as the aim of the dramatist was to present the hero as a model to be emulated. Hence, he was rewarded in the end. Thus, there is poetic justice in the tragedy unlike the Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. Another version of such a play is the blank verse tragedy which uses the blank verse instead of the heroic couplet as the metre. John Dryden wrote such Heroic plays His *All for Love* based on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* is a famous Heroic play.

4. Domestic Tragedy: This type of tragedy existed in the eighteenth century. It deals with the domestic day to day life of average middle class citizens and shows that family life and happiness are destroyed if the husband or the wife strays from the path of virtue. This type of tragedy flourished due to the rise in sentimentalism. There is a conscious attempt to make it ordinary, commonplace by doing away with the rhetorical style of the Heroic play. Fate had an important role in this type of tragedy as the authors felt that such situations gave a chance for the display of sentiments. George Lillo was the most important writer of domestic tragedy. His *The London Merchant* or *The History of George Barnwell* (1733) is the best example of a domestic tragedy. The play is full of artificiality and is in prose. The domestic tragedy paved the way for the modern theatre.

Types of Comedy:

1. Romantic Comedy: was developed by Elizabethan dramatists on the model of contemporary prose romances such as Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* (1590), the source of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599). Such comedy represents a love affair that involves a beautiful and engaging heroine (sometimes disguised as a man); the course of this love does not run smooth, yet overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union. Many of the boy-meets girl plots of later writers are instances of romance comedy, as are many motion pictures. In 'Anatomy of Criticism' (1957), Northrop Frye points out that some of Shakespeare's romantic comedies manifest a movement from the normal world of conflict and trouble into "the green world" – the forest of Arden in *As You Like It*, or the fairy-haunted of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – in

which the problems and injustices of the ordinary world are dissolved, enemies reconciled, and true lovers united. Frye regards that phenomenon (together with other aspects of these comedies, such as their conclusion in the social ritual of a wedding, a feast, or a dance) as evidence that comic plots derive from primitive myths and rituals that celebrated the victory of spring over winter. In Shakespeare's romantic comedies, the women are often superior to the men, while in his tragedies he "creates such nightmare female figures as Goneril, Regan, Lady Macbeth and Volumnia".

2. Satiric Comedy: ridicules political policies or philosophical doctrines, or else attacks deviations from the accepted social order by making ridiculous the violators of its standards of morals or manners. The early master of satiric comedy was the Greek Aristophanes (450 B.C. to 385 B.C) whose plays mocked political philosophical, and literary matters of his age. Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson, wrote satiric or "corrective comedy". In his Volpone and The Alchemist for example the greed and ingenuity of one or more intelligent but rascally swindlers, and the equal greed but stupid gullibility of their victims are made grotesquely or repulsively ludicrous rather than lightly amusing.

3. The Comedy of Manners: Originated in the New Comedy of the Greek Menander, 342-292 B.C. (as distinguished from the Old Comedy represented by Aristophanes, 450-385 B.C.) and was developed by the Roman dramatists Plautus and Terence in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. Their plays dealt with the vicissitudes of young lovers and included what became the characters of much later comedy, such as the clever servant, old and stodgy parents and the wealthy rival. The English comedy of manners was early exemplified by Shakespeare's "Love's Labours Lost" and "Much Ado about Nothing" and was given high polish in Restoration Comedy (1660-1700). The Restoration form owes much to the brilliant dramas of the French writer Moliere (1622-73). It deals with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper-class society, and relies for comic effect in a large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue-often in the form of repartee, a witty conversational give and take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing match – as well as on the violations of social standards and decorum by would be wits, jealous husbands, conniving rivals and foppish dandies. Excellent examples are William Congreve's The Way of the World and William Wycherley's The Country Wife. A middle-class reaction against what had come to be considered the immortality of situation and indecency of dialogue in the Courtly Restoration Comedy resulted in the Sentimental Comedy of the eighteenth century. In the latter part of the century, however, Oliver Goldsmith (she stoops to conquer) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan (The Rivals and A School for Scandal) revived the wit and gaiety, while deleting the indecency, of Restoration Comedy. The comedy of manners lapsed in the early nineteenth century, but was revived by many skillful dramatists, from A. W. Pinero and Oscar Wilde (The Importance of Being Earnest 1895) through George Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward, to Neil Simon, Alan Ayckbourn, Wendy Wasserstein and other recent and contemporary writers. Many of these comedies have also been adapted for the cinema.

4. Farce: is a type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter – "belly laughs" in the parlance of the theatre. To do so it commonly employs highly exaggerated

or caricatured types of characters, puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations, and often makes free use of sexual mix-ups, broad verbal humour and physical bustle and horseplay. Farce was a component in the comic episodes in medieval miracle plays, such as the Wakefield plays, Noah and the Second Shepherd's play, and constituted the matter of the Italian Commedia dell'arte in the Renaissance. In the English drama that has best stood the test of time, farce is usually an episode in a more complex form of comedy- examples are the knockabout scenes in Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew and The Merry Wives of Windsor. The plays of the French playwright George Feydean (1862-1921), relying in great part on sexual humour and innuendo are true farce throughout as in Brandon Thomas Charley's Aunt, an American play of 1892, which has often been revived, and also some of the current plays of Tom Stoppard. ...It should be noted that the term "farce" or sometimes "farce comedy" is applied also to plays – a supreme example in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) – in which exaggerated character – types find themselves in ludicrous situations in the course of an improbable plot, but which achieve their comic effects not by broad humour and bustling action, but by the sustained brilliance and wit of the dialogue. Farce is also a frequent comic tactic in the theatre of the absurd.

A distinction is often made between high and low comedy. High comedy, as described by George Meredith in the classic essay, The Idea of Comedy (1877) evokes "intellectual laughter" – thoughtful laughter from spectators who remain emotionally detached from the action – at the spectacle of folly, pretentiousness, and incongruity of human behaviour. Meredith finds it in its highest form within the comedy of manners, in the combats of wit (sometimes identified now as the "love duels" between such intelligent, highly verbal, and well- matched lovers as Benedick and Beatrice in Shakespeare's Much Ado about Nothing (1598-99) and Mirabell and Millament in Congreve's The Way of the World (1700). Low comedy, at the other extreme, has little or no intellectual appeal, but undertakes to arouse laughter by jokes, or 'gags' and by slapstick humour and boisterous or clownish physical activity; it is therefore, one of the common components of farce.

5) Comedy of Humours: A type of comedy developed by Ben Jonson, the Elizabethan playwright, based on the ancient physiological theory of the "four humours" that was still current in Jonson's time. The humours were held to be the four primary fluids blood, phlegm choleric (or yellow bile) and melancholy (or black bile) – whose temperament (mixture) was held to determine both a person's physical condition and type of character. An imbalance of one or another humour in a temperament was said to produce four kinds of dispositions whose names have survived the underlying theory sanguine (from the Latin "sanguis", blood) phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic. In Jonson's comedy of humours each of the major characters has a preponderant humour that gives him a characteristic distortion or eccentricity of disposition. Jonson expounds his theory in the "Introduction to this play Every Man in his Humours (1598) and exemplifies the mode in his later comedies. The Jonsonian type of humours character appear in plays by other Elizabethans, and remained influential in the comedy of manners of the Restoration period (1660-1700).

6) Sentimental Comedy: This type of comedy came into existence in the eighteenth century. It emphasized a sort of moral philosophy which was a reaction against the stoicism of the seventeenth century wherein reason and unemotional will carried importance. Sentimental comedy is a representation of the middle-class life that replaced the tough amorality and the comic or satiric representation of aristocratic sexual license in Restoration comedy. It is also called play of sensibility. It lays emphasis on the human capability for sympathy and wishing others well and aimed to develop social consciousness and a sense of communal responsibility in an era of expanding commercialism. Oliver Goldsmith in his “Comparison between Sentimental and laughing Comedy” (1773) remarked, “The virtues of private life are exhibited rather than the vices exposed, and the distresses rather than the faults of mankind make our interest in the piece”, characters “though they want humour, have abundance of sentiment and feeling”. Consequently the audience “sit at a play as gloomy as at the tabernacle”. Plays such as Richard Steele’s The Conscious Lovers (1772) and Richard Cumberland’s The West Indian (1771) present monumentally benevolent heroes and heroines of the middle class, whose dialogue abounds with elevated moral sentiments and who, prior to the manipulated happy ending suffer tribulations designed to evolve from audience the maximum of pleasurable tears.

Opera: This versatile genre of drama combines theatre, dialogue, music and dance to tell grand stories of tragedy and comedy. Since characters express their feelings and intentions through song rather than dialogue, performers must be both, skilled actors and singers.

Melodrama: ‘Melos’ is Greek for song, and the term melodrama was usually applied to all musical plays, including opera. In early nineteenth century London, many plays were produced with a musical accompaniment that (as in modern motion pictures) served simply to fortify the emotional tone of the various scenes; the procedure was developed in part to circumvent the Licensing Act (1737), which allowed “legitimate” plays only as the monopoly of Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres, but permitted musical entertainments elsewhere. The term “melodrama” is now often applied to some of the typical plays, especially during the Victorian period, that were written to be produced to musical accompaniment.

The Victorian melodrama can be said to bear the relation to tragedy that farce does to comedy. Typically, the protagonists are flat types; the hero is great-hearted, the heroine pure as the driven snow, and the villain a monster of malignity. The plot revolves around malevolent intrigue and violent action, while the credibility of both character and plot is often sacrificed for violent effect and emotional opportunism. The terms melodrama and melodramatic are also in an extended sense, applied to any literary work or episode, whether in drama or in prose fiction that relies on implausible events and sensational action.