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**DRAMA**

Drama is primarily written to be performed or acted on stage. Dance drama, radio and television drama, mime, pantomime, heroic and morality plays etc. principally however, they all come under tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy, and melodrama (a small problem becomes a crisis).

In its widest sense, a drama is any work designed to be presented by actors on a stage. Similarly, ‘drama’ denotes a broad literary genre that includes a variety of forms, from pageant and spectacle to tragedy and comedy, as well as countless types and subtypes. More commonly, in modern usage, however, a drama is a work that treats serious subjects and themes but does not aim at the grandeur of tragedy. This use of the term originated with the eighteenth-century French writer Denis Diterot, who used the word ‘drame’ to designate his plays about middle-class life; thus ‘drama’ typically features characters of a less exalted than those of tragedy.

Examples of classical drama include Menander’s comedy ‘Dyscolus’ and Sophocles’ tragedy and ‘Oedipus Rex’. Contemporary dramas include Eugene O’Neill’s ‘The Iceman Cometh’, Lillian Hellman’s ‘Little Foxes’.

Source: Richardson’s Illustrated Dictionary of Literature

Drama develops out of a progression of events. And there are contrasts of character and emotional conflicts, either in action or word. Drama remains even when words are stripped away, even though it then gives up its status as literature. Let us take *Waiting for Godot* for example.

It is a play about waiting. This drama conceivably might be called a play about asking questions, as the title indicates. In its telegraphic style, it is a drama of the dilemma of the modern man – his sense of uncertainty. And this skeletal drama does precisely what a far more sophisticated drama does on a larger scale. It reveals a setting in which characters speak, interact, and develop; it comments upon the human scene; it moves us to respond to the thoughts and emotions expressed. This combination of character, action, setting, and thought, using this dialogue form, and producing this effect upon an audience, creates a drama. There is actually not enough to tell in the play. Setting is too diffuse, the characters to unearthly, the action too static, the events too limited, the conflict too suppressed, the thought too undeveloped. But it is a potential drama.

On the success of Herbert Rosse’s *The Maids* (Ballet), well known critic, Walter Terry comments as follows:

“A superb dance- drama in which attraction and repulsion, desire and abnegation, physical union, and individual isolation, ‘a profound unreality’ passes itself off ‘as reality’ are projected through spare and powerful and cuttingly direct choreographic action”.

Drama itself is elemental in its appeal; we use the word “dramatic” to apply to experiences that are lively, striking, intense, and emotionally moving. These are the qualities drama has derived from its theatrical traditions.

A student reading drama as literature needs to keep firmly in mind its tradition as a lively art.

Better approach to understand drama may be to examine the various ways drama has been defined, so we can note the qualities of drama that are highlighted. In the everyday use of the word drama, the element of conflict is often given prominence. This particularly emerges from the way it is seen in the mass media. The dramatic is any situation which creates a sense of the unexpected or the abnormal. At other times, the dramatic is limited to that which involves action in the sense of demonstration. For instance, a teacher may be said to be dramatic if he injects life into his teaching by acting out situations and experiences that he is describing. For our purpose, a broader and more universal understanding of the dramatic is needed. For a start, you should recognize the fact that drama involves some components which no informed examination can overlook. These components are action, dialogue, and conflict. Drama brings all these together to make a meaningful whole. We shall take a closer look at these aspects of drama in a moment. However, we must immediately admit that the ultimate experience of drama is the presentation on stage before an audience. This implies that it has a message to communicate and has some relevance to human experience. This is probably why the concept of mimesis or imitation is often emphasized in relation to drama. To say that drama is mimetic implies that it is imitative of reality. The mimetic impulse of drama is one feature that makes it appeal to people. In other words, it is the quality that makes it relevant.

The playwright usually writes his plays character by character, scene by scene and act by act to avoid any confusion and to ensure correctness during performance.

Let us for a moment consider the components of drama that we earlier identified.

**ACTION**

This is what keeps the plot of a play moving. The play emerges from the enactment of actions before an audience. Acting generally generates other actions. Conflict evolves in the process until there is a climax under which the plot is finally terminated through the resolution or denouncement.

**CHARACTER**

Drama is impossible without people. People who are allotted roles in a play are called characters. Character is an important component of drama as is dialogue. The verbal exchanges among characters in a play help to realise the intention of a playwright. Just as a novelist narrates his story, the playwright depends on the interaction of characters to expand his ideas.

Characters are made to speak in such a way that the situations desired by the writer will be created. Even though the writer often supplies relevant background information, the characters always play out the writer's intentions in their action and verbal exchanges, With the exception of mime that does not use dialogue, most forms of drama depend largely on dialogue. At times, some characters also embark on an extensive revelation of their minds to the audience; such bursts are called soliloquies. It is normal that characters be assigned the language that is appropriate to their social status in the drama.

Each type of drama has its peculiar characteristics, but we shall consider those that are common to them all.

**PLAYWRIGHT**

This is the author or writer of a drama text or play. For example, Wole Soyinka is the playwright of *The Lion and the Jewel*, and William Shakespeare is the playwright of *The Twelfth Night*".

**CHARACTERS**

These are the persons, animals, other creatures, or things that the playwright has created to act out the play or drama. There are usually two types of characters: the flat and round. a. Flat characters are static characters who do not change from the beginning to the end of the play. b. round characters, in contrast to the flat characters, are dynamic and they grow and develop with the play. Everything about them is revealed in the play. They are usually the main characters of the play.

**PROTAGONISTS**

These are the leading characters in a play. They are the most important. The entire action of the play centres around them. They are the heroes or heroines of the play. If the play has a happy ending, the protagonists are comic characters. If the play has a sad ending, the protagonists are tragic characters.

**ANTAGONISTS**

These are the characters whose main aim is to contend with the protagonists. They work against the interest of the protagonists. In most cases, they lead to the downfall of the protagonists, if the play is tragic, or to the happy ending if the play is comical.

**CONFLICT**

It is usually a struggle for supremacy between the protagonists and antagonists of the play. The conflict is usually resolved. This is called conflict resolution or denouement.

The terms related to drama text are: a. Flat character b. round character c. Protagonist d Antagonist e. The playwright, of course, it is possible for you to view a drama text from another angle. This is the angle of the characteristic features of the drama text itself. Some of the features you should be familiar with are plot, scenes, acts, prologue, epilogue, interlude, flashback, dramatis personae, cast, suspense, climax and soliloquy. Indeed, you will need to know the terms and definitions related to drama to be able to appreciate drama texts.

A scene is the performable part into which a drama text is divided. Scenes are under an act, and they represent a complete episode or event to be dramatized. Most of the Shakespearean plays are presented in scenes. Indeed, a scene is a sequence of continuous action in a play. A play is made up of acts, and acts are made up of scenes. A plot is the central plan or an outline of events in a play. The plot usually runs from the beginning of the play to the end. A prologue suggests an introductory scene to the play, or an address or speech made before the commencement of a dramatic performance. Many of the Shakespearean plays start with prologues. So also do Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* and Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer.* An epilogue is the direct opposite of a prologue. A short scene is tagged to a play at the end, like an appendage or final address or a final speech at the close of dramatic performance. An example is found in many of the Shakespearean plays, and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer.*

Use standard dictionaries to find the meaning of the following dramatic terms: interlude, flashback, cast, dramatic personae, suspense, climax, and soliloquy.

Conflict is another aspect of drama you will need to recognise. It naturally grows out of interaction of the characters. It is a product of the contending forces in a drama. The conflicting actions and tendencies manifest when the play reaches the climax. The conflict is eventually resolved at the end and is known as denouement (conflict resolution).

**ORIGINS OF DRAMA**

It may interest you to know that there have been debates as to the origins of drama. You should not be surprised at this. It is customary for scholars to advance arguments and counterarguments on matters of interest. Scholarly debates are meant to help us to properly understand issues by scrutinizing them and subjecting them to critical assessment. There are mainly three positions or theories that have been proposed to explain the origin of drama. Let us quickly add that there may not be only one explanation of drama in different parts of the world.

**RITUAL ORIGIN THEORY**

The theory that insists on the ritual origin of drama is about the most influential. It suggests that the roots of drama may be traced to ritual observances. This ritual would normally involve a ceremony in which the priest played an important role at a designated location. The priest would also wear a special dress especially meant for the occasion. The role, dress and utterances of the priest will have parallels in the theatre. The case of the Dionysian ritual in ancient Greece has often been cited as a case point. This explains why the roots of Greek drama are generally traced to the ritual observances in the temple of Dionysus.

**THE MIMETIC IMPULSE THEORY**

One other attempt at explaining the origin of drama suggests that we cannot divorce drama from the tendency to imitate actions and experiences, as a way of seeking to understand them better. The unique identity of drama is that, like other forms of literature, it can be read, and it can also be experienced on stage. But there are certain aspects of drama that mark it as different from the prose narrative which is realized through narration: drama only unfolds through dialogue. While the novel is also divided into chapters and a poem is written mostly in stanzas, drama is divided into Acts and Scenes. Interesting dramatic practice allows the dramatist a lot of latitude. There is no rule specifying how long a play can be. William Shakespeare made the five - act structure the standard for his plays. Many playwrights have since adopted other standards. While dialogue is central to the advancement of action in acts and scenes, **stage directors** help give shape to actions on stage, and they represent the playwright's intervention. A few plays make use of the **narrator** whose duty is to give some insight into actions to be anticipated. In addition to the fact that a drama text can be read by an individual in the privacy of his residence, the **audience** in the theatre can give immediate reaction to a play which is being presented on stage. It is also possible to have a sense of **plot** in a play. Without a clear understanding of the story line, it is impossible to properly appreciate a play.

In many cases, the actions in the play will revolve round the protagonist. All other characters in the play must also be seen and assessed to determine the role they are assigned. Most of the time, the language of a character is allotted will reveal a lot about his social position, level of education, and so on.

The world of drama is an exciting world, one in which there is entertainment and the portrayal of a variety of character traits. Drama also engages many issues bordering on our religious, social, political, and economic experiences. These are issues you may need to draw more attention to while assessing a play. In a sense, the experience of drama makes it much more related to society. The immediate experience of drama in the theatre itself is a pointer to this.

Dramatic literature, you will soon discover, is very rich. Your enjoyment of it will be determined by your ability to recognize some of its components. In this section of the unit, we shall endeavour to look at some of them. Elements of a drama:

**PLOT**

The plot refers to the story that a play tells. Normally, the events are arranged sequentially. This does not happen all the time. Some of the plays distort the sequence of events. What you do is to reconstruct the play. The fact that the plot of a play is not sequential or chronological does not necessarily suggest that you will have any difficulty understanding it.

**SETTING**

Setting generally refers to the location of a literary work. The setting is a reference to the placement of a work in both time and place. The locale or environment in which a play is set will determine a lot about it. The setting is often related to the focus or concern of the play.

**THEME**

Each play makes a statement about the social world. This may emerge from an exploration of the entire play. The theme is the central message of a play. It is however possible to have sub-themes along with major dramatists who seek to make statements that have universal validity in their works. Generally, plays that treat common human problems make statements that have timeless relevance and consequently have more appeal as they speak to people of all ages and at all places.

**CHARACTERIZATION**

Characters do not just occur in a play. Playwrights take care to create the right kind of characters to serve their purpose. In the first place a playwright creates characters in line with his purpose. Most of the time the characters are types. Typical characters are meant to represent certain categories of people in society. A character may represent people or members of the ruling elite, and another may represent the poor and the oppressed that are often at the mercy of the rich and powerful. Dramatists always try to delineate characters, that is, establish the individual identities of characters, through the particular traits that the characters depict. In most cases, language is used. For instance, you must have observed that many of the uneducated characters that feature in plays on the television are often made to speak Pidgin English, while their bosses speak Standard English. Language thus becomes a yardstick for character delineation in this case. In addition to this, the characters will be made to wear dresses that will reflect their social status on stage.

In almost every play, there are characters that act prominent roles. These are called major characters. The others are called minor characters. The most prominent characters in a play are called the protagonist. It is possible to further describe characters in a play by finding out whether they are flat. Flat characters are those that embody certain qualities. They are not capable of growing (i.e., changing). They simply personify some values e.g., faithfulness, goodness etc. The individual identities of these characters are not established. They are found in didactic plays, a good example of which is Everyman. Round characters, on the other hand, are those that have individual identities. They can change in the course of a play. From all that we have said about characterization, it should be easy for you to guess what characterization is all about. It means the pattern adapted in the creation of characters in a work. This includes roles and tendencies assigned to particular characters. The following are the main elements of drama: (a) Theme (b) Plot (c) Setting (d) Characterization; and the other elements related to the plot are: (a) Exposition (b) Complication, (c) Climax, (d) Denouement or Resolution and Conclusion. Exposition refers to the phase of the plot in which the characters are just being introduced. It is at this stage that a lot is revealed to us about the characters before they are seen in action. The exposition may give us some insight into the past of the characters if this is important for us to understand them. The complication emerges when in the course of the play there is an obstacle on the way of the protagonist. The climax marks the height of the conflict in the play. At this point the stage is set for the major act that will lead to the resolution of the major problem in the play. What follows the climax is the denouement which in French means the "untying of a knot". It is also known as resolution or conclusion.

**DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES**

This may be a convenient point to draw attention to some techniques that are commonly used in dramatic works. You will discover these techniques in the texts you are to study in this course.

**SUSPENSE**

Suspense is a technique by which the playwright keeps the reader/audience in anxious expectation of what will happen next. It is a good way of sustaining their interest in the play. It is a common strategy in drama.

**COMIC RELIEF**

This is a moment of light or seemingly unserious action which is marked by laughter after some serious or tragic action. As the name suggests, it is intended to create some atmosphere of relief in a play. The comic relief is often provided by clowns (characters that are meant to entertain others) in the plays of Shakespeare. They crack jokes or do some other funny things that will make the audience laugh and thereby get rid of the tension that might have been created earlier by a serious action or experience.

**FLASHBACK**

The flashback technique enables the playwright to bring an experience in the past to the present to illuminate a problem or our understanding of a matter.

**FORESHADOWING**

This is a technique which enables a playwright to an experience in the future. It creates anxiety and anticipation of the experience.

**DRAMATIC IRONY**

This occurs when an event or situation is seen in a particular way by a character in a play whereas the audience and some other characters have a proper outlook on it. It creates anxiety when it intensifies a tragic experience.

**DEUS EX MACHINA**

This is a technique through which a supernatural force is brought in to facilitate some action or experience. This technique originally involved bringing a god to the stage to solve a problem.

**ALIENATION EFFECT**

This is a technique popularized by the German playwrights and theatre directors to inject some detachment into the way actors and the audience relate with their plays. This will prevent much emotional involvement and it may involve interaction between the actors and the audience. Each dramatic work often brings some ingenuity to the use of each of the elements and techniques.

**THE ORIGIN OF TRAGEDY**

Scholars seem to have agreed that the roots of tragedy must be traced to the Greece of the Fifth Century BC. Aristotle's theory of tragedy was formulated in the Fourth Century BC. Many people believed that Aristotle simply prescribed rules with which tragedy should be judged. On the contrary, his outlook seems to have been shaped by his familiarity with classical tragedies that had been performed. His theory may then be seen as an attempt to describe what he had carefully observed. Even though tragedy, as a dramatic form, is generally believed to have originated from Greece, it has evolved over the ages, incorporating changes and modifications of principle and practice in modern times.

**CLASSICAL TRAGEDY:** **ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION**

Aristotle defined tragedy as “A representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and some amplified in a language enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to the several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of emotion”. It is necessary to analyse the elements of Aristotelian theory of tragedy as noted as in the quotation, for a proper understanding. They help us to understand the classical principles of tragedy.

Aristotle's Poetics remains a good guide to the Greek tradition of tragedy which is commonly referred to as classical drama. As stated earlier, his ideas must have been shaped by his exposure to tragedies that were staged in his own days. It is however apparent that his outlook on tragedy was largely shaped by Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, which also serves as his favourite example.

**TRAGIC HERO**

The hero in a classical tragedy was expected to be a man of noble birth. The nobility of the character is essential to make his fall tragic. This simply implies that the fall of an ordinary man was not considered remarkable enough to provoke dramatic interest. This explains why tragic heroes in most of these plays are either kings or other highly placed persons.

**ELEVATED LANGUAGE**

The language of tragedy, in the classical tradition, was also expected to be elevated. The ideal language for this form of drama was therefore seen as verse. It is reasonable to conclude that only elevated language would be suitable for the class of people that were the object of tragedy. Language was certainly seen as a reflection of the status of character and the seriousness of the subject of tragic plays.

**THREE UNITIES (TIME, PLACE, ACTION)**

The Aristotelian principles also recognized the need to ensure that the action of the play is shaped by what have come to be known as the three unities. One of the principles is that the action of the play should not extend beyond a day. The unity of place has to do with the concentration of the action to a locale. The unity of action implies that only one action should be seen on the stage at any time. In addition, there should be only one plot. This equally extends to the purity of genre, implying that there should not be any digression. The plot must be so tight that it will not make any room for a comic relief.

**TRAGIC FLAW**

One other feature of classical tragedy, as clarified by Aristotle, has to do with the weakness of the tragic hero. The tragic hero was expected to have a weakness in his character which will make his fall possible.

**CATHARSIS -PURGATION OF EMOTION**

The last element of classical tragedy has nothing to do with the play or the hero. It is directly related to the effect of the fall on the audience. The fall of the tragic hero is expected to elicit the purgation of emotion (what Aristotle called catharsis) due to the relief that the hero will cause.