Analyzing Drama

When you think about drama, you may recall plays you studied in high school, including those by William Shakespeare. Most of Shakespeare’s plays are classified as tragedies or comedies, but the general term “drama” (from the Greek *dran*,“to do” or “to perform”) refers to a story acted out by actors on a stage, or, nowadays, in front of a camera. The creator of drama is called a dramatist or *playwright*. The second syllable, “wright,” refers to a *maker*, as in “wainwright,” not a “write-r,” and it is important to remember that, in the truest sense, plays are “wrought,” carrying a connotation of construction in their making, because the intention is not just that they be written and read, but that they be mounted as productions and observed. Thus, when you read a play, it is essential to imagine it as performance and spectacle—not just as dialogue on a page.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) called drama an “imitated human action.” He declared that dramas should observe the three *unities* of time, place, and action. By unity of time he

limits the play’s action to approximately one day; by unity of place he limits it to one

setting; and by unity of action he limits it to a single set of incidents that are related as

cause and effect and “having a beginning, a middle, and an end.” Although the unities

are not strictly observed by playwrights (for example, most of Shakespeare’s plays depart from this rule), their observance does help create dramatic focus and intensity, necessary elements in theatre where the audience must remain attentive for at least two hours to absorb the full experience of the spectacle.

Drama in Western cultures dates back to Ancient Greek and Roman drama, which had its beginnings in ceremonial rites. Comedy evolved from fertility rites, while tragedy originated from rites connected with the life-death cycle. The three major ancient Greek playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (all circa 525–400 BC), used Greek myth and legend to fashion tragedies that centred on the downfall of noble figures. Their plays featured heroes or heroines in their struggle against an unavoidable destiny. A group of people forming a *chorus* commented on the action. Aeschylus’ main concern was with the cosmic significance of tragic destiny; Sophocles and Euripides focused more on the psychology of the protagonist in his or her struggle with that destiny.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) exemplifies Elizabethan drama, considered “the golden age” of English drama. Elizabethan dramatists combined elements from ancient drama with newer, native forms to produce a wide variety of dramatic forms, from histories and chronicle plays, to comedy, romance, and tragedy. The Puritan government

that replaced the Stuart monarchy disapproved of the theatre and closed London playhouses in 1642. When the theatres re-opened in 1660, comedies of manners and domestic tragedies prevailed and drama became more a form of entertainment exclusive to the educated classes during the Restoration period and into the eighteenth century.

As does the modern novelist, the modern dramatist is likely to locate the principal action of the play within the minds of the characters; psychological interest and the contemporary theme of alienation are reinforced by experimental techniques that made the drama relevant to contemporary audiences. Several modern playwrights sought to revive traditional dramatic practices: in the twentieth century Eugene O’Neill attempted to update the commentator function of the Greek chorus in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931); Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) wrote a modern American tragedy in the classical tradition. Although certainly not all works of drama can be classified as comedies or tragedies, the divisions between them have traditionally defined, for the playwright, the boundaries of human experience, because comedy and tragedy are concerned with human limits.

# Comedy

In viewing human limits as weaknesses, comedy celebrates the lesser—the carnal or

physical—self. Comedy uses laughter as a form of displacement, enabling its audience to identify the “other” as debased, silly, pretentious, or unimportant.

**Low comedy** traditionally draws its characters from low-life figures, that is, socially or morally inferior stereotypes: servants, shopkeepers, prostitutes. Low comedy lacks a serious moral purpose and may be used, as in many of Shakespeare’s plays, to divert temporarily the attention of the audience from weightier matters (*comic relief*); low comedy as *farce* depends on the idea of the absurd and draws attention to events that appear meaningless or valueless out of context, the pratfall, for example.

**High comedy** is more sophisticated and traditionally uses characters from a higher socio-economic class; the humour of high comedy appeals more to the intellect (characterized as *wit*, *wittiness*), having such targets as social pretensions and character inconsistencies. It typically has a more complex function than low comedy, dealing with serious issues like human relationships—even dealing with the subjects of tragedy from a perspective of lightness and humour.

**Satire** can be considered a genre apart from comedy or tragedy, but its use of ironic humour aligns it to high comedy. In addition to humour, satire uses ridicule and irony to undercut, critique, or attack human institutions, ostensibly for the purpose of improving them. Satire may be mild, intended to make society’s members more aware (*Horatian satire*) or harsh, intent on attacking these institutions (*Juvenalian satire*). Related to satire is *parody*, in which the writer imitates another literary work, poking fun at it and/or revealing its weaknesses.

**Comic plot.** Fortune, chance, and coincidence are the major external forces that drive the plot of comedy; inner forces that determine comic action include such instincts and motivations as physical desire, greed, envy, ambition, and concern with appearances. In the end, base human desires usually are punished, while continuity is suggested by a marriage between the most worthy and virtuous characters.

**Comic theme.** One of the most important themes in drama is that of identity, perhaps

because in drama the onstage character is isolated in a way that he or she usually is not in a novel—because all drama is character-driven due to limitations of time and space necessitated by the stage. *Asides, monologues*, and *soliloquies*—speeches in which a

character reveals his or her own thoughts for the ears of the audience alone—can be used to underscore this sense of isolation. Comedy may revolve around exchange and

multiplicity of identity. In most of Shakespeare’s comedies, for example, there are frequent changes of identity and/or mistaken identities.

# Tragedy

Tragedy celebrates the greater, ennobling self by viewing the limits to human strengths

tested against more powerful forces; tragedy involves cataclysmic change from prosperity

to intense suffering and, usually, the death of the protagonist (the *denouement* or *catastrophe*). This suffering arouses a complex mix of emotions in its audience in which fear and pity are particularly strong. Traditionally, the characters of tragedy were high-status individuals, royal personages; this, however, is not the case with most tragedies written in the last 200 years. It is essential, though, that we see the tragic protagonist as admirable in some way.

**Tragic plot.** The exterior forces of fate or destiny are associated with tragedy; the inner force that drives the protagonist in classical tragedy is pride (*hubris*) or some such trait that exists in an extreme or distorted form (*tragic flaw*, or *hamartia*).

**Tragic theme.** The theme of identity is important in tragedy, also, but from the perspective of the tearing away and negation of identity. In both ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, the protagonist was a king or high-status figure, making the fall from the greatest height as devastating as possible for an individual and in social terms as

well, for the loss of the monarch would overturn the entire society. Shakespeare’s King

Lear falls from kingship, to an old man divested of kingly power, to a madman in a storm in a wilderness (heath) prior to his death.

16. The Literary Research Essay