

Highlighted parts of the course « Early American Drama »

What can be said about Early American Drama ?

Early American drama refers to the theatrical productions that took place in the United States during its **colonial period** and the **early years of its independence**. The earliest recorded drama in America was performed in **1656** in **Virginia** by **British colonists**, and by the **mid-18th century**, there were regular theatrical performances in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.

Theater in **colonial America** was **heavily influenced** by **British drama**, with **performances of plays** by **William Shakespeare** and **other popular British playwrights being staged**. Many of these plays were performed by **traveling companies of actors**, who would perform in **taverns, public halls, and other makeshift venues**. Due to **religious objections from Puritan** and other **conservative groups**, **theater was not widely accepted in early America**, and it was often **seen** as a **sinful** and **immoral activity**.

However, by **the mid-18th century**, **theater** had gained **more acceptance** and **popularity**, with many cities having their own permanent theaters. Some of the **most popular plays** during this time were **historical dramas, patriotic plays, and adaptations of popular novels**. One of the most successful plays of the time was **« The Contrast » by Royall Tyler**, which **premiered** in **1787** and is **considered the first American play**.

Early American drama also included plays that addressed **contemporary social** and **political issues**, such as **slavery** and **women's rights**. One notable example is **« The Prince of Parthia » by Thomas Godfrey**, which **premiered** in **1767** and is **considered the first American play to address political issues**.

In the early years of the United States' independence, **theater** continued to **flourish** and became an **important cultural institution**. **Theaters** were built in **major cities across the country**, and **many popular European plays were adapted and performed**. **American playwrights** also began to emerge, such as **Augustin Daly, who wrote popular plays such as « Under the Gaslight »** and **« Horizon, »** and **Eugene O'Neill**, who later became one of the **most celebrated playwrights** in American history.

Overall, **early American drama** played an **important role in shaping the country's cultural identity** and **reflecting the social and political issues of the time**. It also **paved the way** for the **development of American theater** as we know it today.

Definitions of some basic theatrical words ?

Here are **definitions** for some **basic theatrical words** :

Play : A literary work intended for performance in a theater.

Script : The written text of a play or other theatrical production.

Scene : A section of a play or other dramatic work that takes place in a single location and time.

Act : A major division within a play, typically comprised of multiple scenes.

Character : A person or entity represented in a dramatic work, usually played by an actor.

Dialogue : The spoken words of characters in a play or script.

Monologue : A long speech given by one character in a play or performance, often addressed to other characters or to the audience.

Soliloquy : A monologue in which a character speaks their thoughts aloud, usually when alone on stage.

Stage directions : Instructions in a play script indicating the movements and positioning of characters, as well as other elements of the performance, such as lighting and sound effects.

Protagonist : The main character of a play or other dramatic work, often the one with whom the audience is meant to identify.

Antagonist : A character or force that opposes the protagonist, creating conflict and tension in the play or performance.

Plot : The sequence of events in a play or other dramatic work, including the actions of characters and the development of conflict.

Theme : The central idea or message of a play or other artistic work, often exploring universal human experiences or issues.

Setting : The time, place, and circumstances in which a play or other dramatic work takes place.

Performance : The act of presenting a play or other dramatic work in front of an audience, usually by actors on a stage.

- **Audience :** The group of people who watch a performance or production.
- **Relevance :** The degree to which something is related to the current topic, subject matter, or theme of the production.
- **Suspense :** A feeling of anticipation or tension created by the uncertainty of what will happen next in a story or play.
- **Literary work :** A written piece of literature, such as a play, novel, or poem, that is intended to be performed or read.

- **Action :** The physical movements and events that take place on stage during a performance.
- **Conflict :** The struggle or disagreement between two or more characters in a literary work.
- **Climax :** The point of highest tension or drama in a literary work, usually marked by a turning point or a significant event.
- **Actor :** A performer who portrays a character in a theatrical production.
- **Villain :** The antagonist or antagonist force in a story, often depicted as an evil or immoral character.
- **Hero :** The protagonist or main character in a story, often depicted as a courageous or virtuous character.
- **Deuteragonist :** The secondary or supporting character in a story, often having a significant role or impact on the plot.
- **Foil character :** A character who is used to contrast with another character, highlighting their differences and/or similarities.
- **Confidant :** A character who serves as a trusted friend or advisor to another character in a literary work.
- **Stock character :** A stereotypical or commonly used character in a literary work, such as the « damsel in distress » or the « wise old man ».
- **Round character :** A complex and fully developed character in a literary work, often displaying a range of emotions and characteristics.
- **Cast :** The group of actors who perform in a production.

- **Aside** : A theatrical device where a character speaks directly to the audience, revealing their thoughts or feelings.
- **Prologue** : An introductory section or speech at the beginning of a literary work or theatrical production.
- **Epilogue** : A concluding section or speech at the end of a literary work or theatrical production.

Definitions of « romance » and « comic » ?

In the context of *literature* and *drama*, « *romance* » and « *comic* » are two distinct genres.

Romance refers to a genre of *fiction* or *drama* that *emphasizes adventure, chivalry, love, and often supernatural or magical elements*. It often features a *hero* who embarks on a quest or journey, encountering obstacles and triumphing over them through *bravery* and *honor*. *Romance* can be found in *early American drama*, such as *the plays of William Dunlap and Royall Tyler*.

Comic, on the other hand, refers to a *genre of literature* or *drama* that *emphasizes humor, wit, and satire*. It often features *exaggerated characters and situations, and is intended to entertain and amuse the audience*. Comic elements can be found in many forms of early American drama, from the slapstick humor of farces to the witty banter of romantic comedies.

Types of drama ?

There are different types of drama, each with its own characteristics and purpose. Here are some of the most common types of drama :

Tragedy : A type of drama that portrays the downfall of a tragic hero or heroine. Tragedies are often characterized by their serious themes and the use of heightened language.

Comedy : A type of drama that is intended to be humorous or amusing. Comedies often feature witty dialogue, amusing situations, and a happy ending.

Melodrama : A type of drama that emphasizes exaggerated emotions and sensational action. Melodramas often feature clear-cut heroes and villains, and are designed to elicit strong emotional reactions from the audience.

Farce : A type of comedy that relies on physical humor, exaggerated situations, and improbable plot twists. Farces are often fast-paced and chaotic, and are designed to be entertaining rather than intellectually stimulating.

Tragi-comedy : A play that combines elements of tragedy and comedy, typically with a serious plot that ends happily or with a comic tone.

Burlesque : A type of comedy that exaggerates and parodies serious or dignified subjects, often with bawdy or risqué humor. Burlesque often includes musical and dance performances.

What are the important rules during the Early American Drama ?

During *the early American Drama*, *there were three important rules* :

1. **The Unity of Time :** This rule required that the action of a play should take place within a 24-hour period.
2. **The Unity of Place :** This rule required that the action of a play should take place in a single location.
3. **The Unity of Action :** This rule required that a play should have a single plot that is focused on a single main character, with no subplots or extraneous characters.

These three rules were influenced by *the works of Aristotle and were followed by many early American playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams.* However, as drama evolved and new movements emerged, these rules were gradually abandoned or adapted to suit the needs of the playwright and the audience.

Literary movements during the Early American Drama ???

There were several *literary movements* that influenced early *American Drama*, including :

Puritanism : Puritanism was a religious movement that dominated early American culture. Puritan plays were didactic, focusing on morality and religious instruction.

The Enlightenment : The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that emphasized reason and rationality. Enlightenment plays were often satirical and critical of the social and political institutions of the time.

Romanticism : Romanticism was a literary movement that emphasized emotion and individualism. Romantic plays were often melodramatic and focused on the struggles of the individual.

Realism : Realism was a literary movement that emphasized truthfulness and accuracy in representing the world. Realist plays focused on everyday life and social issues.

Naturalism : Naturalism was a literary movement that emphasized the influence of environment and heredity on human behavior. Naturalist plays often portrayed characters trapped in oppressive social and economic systems.

Expressionism, absurdism, and existentialism were not literary movements during the early American drama period, but they are **significant movements in 20th-century theatre**. Here is a brief overview of each movement :

Expressionism : This movement originated in Germany in the early 20th century and aimed to convey emotions and subjective experiences through distorted and exaggerated forms. Expressionist plays often used surreal and dreamlike elements to explore psychological and social issues.

Absurdism : This movement emerged in the 1950s and was characterized by plays that emphasized the meaningless and absurd nature of human existence. Absurdist plays often featured non-linear plots, unconventional characters, and absurdist humor.

Existentialism : This philosophical movement influenced 20th-century drama and emphasized the individual's search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Existentialist plays often portrayed characters struggling with questions of identity, freedom, and responsibility in the face of a chaotic and unpredictable world.

What are the parts of a typical dramatic structure ?

The **five** parts of a typical dramatic structure are :

1. **Exposition** : This is the first part of a dramatic structure where the setting, characters, and their relationships are introduced to the audience.

2. **Rising Action** : This is the part where the plot thickens, and the conflicts and tensions between the characters become more intense. The rising action leads to the climax.
3. **Climax** : This is the most intense and dramatic point in the play where the conflicts reach their highest point, and the outcome of the story is determined.
4. **Falling Action** : This is the part where the tension and conflicts start to resolve, leading to the conclusion of the story.
5. **Resolution (or Denouement)** : This is the final part of the dramatic structure where the loose ends are tied up, and the story comes to a satisfying conclusion.

What characterized the beginnings of American drama ?

The beginnings of American drama were characterized by the influence of European theater, particularly English theater. **Early American plays** were often **adaptations** or **imitations** of **English plays**. However, as American culture began to develop, playwrights began to explore **themes** and **stories** that were **unique** to **America**, such as the struggle for independence, westward expansion, and the experience of immigration.

Another characteristic of early American drama was its focus on entertainment and spectacle. Plays were often **staged** with elaborate sets, costumes, and special effects to attract audiences. **Melodramas**, which featured **exaggerated emotions** and **moral messages**, were particularly popular.

Religious and **moral themes** were also common in **early American drama**, as many of the **early colonists** were deeply **religious** and saw **theater** as a way to teach moral lessons. However, as **secularism** and **individualism** grew in the 19th century, plays began to explore more complex and controversial themes.

How does the action of a play coincide or differ from the plot ?

The action of a play and the plot are **closely related** but they are not exactly the same thing. **The plot** refers to the series of events that occur in a play, while the action is the physical and emotional behavior of the characters as they respond to those events. In other words, the plot is what happens in **the story**, while the action is **how the characters react and move the story forward.**

For example, in **Shakespeare's play « Romeo and Juliet, »** the plot follows **the tragic love story of the two title characters.** **The action of the play, on the other hand, includes the physical movements and emotional responses of the characters throughout the play,** such as **Romeo's killing of Tybalt and Juliet's faked death.**

The action of a play can coincide with the plot when the characters' actions are directly related to the events of the story. However, there may be times **when** the **action diverges from the plot**, such as **when a character has a subplot or when there is a comic relief scene that doesn't directly relate to the main story.**

Besides, **the action** and **the plot** work together **to create a cohesive and engaging story** for the audience.

What are the three types of modern stages ?

The three types of modern stages are :

1. **Proscenium stage :** This is the **most traditional** and **commonly used stage** in **modern theatre**. The stage is **framed by a large arch (the proscenium arch) through which the audience views the action.** **The audience sits in front of the stage and looks through the arch to see the performers.**
2. **Thrust stage :** This stage juts out into the audience, with **the audience sitting on three sides of the stage.** **The performers are surrounded by the audience on three sides,** which creates an intimate and immersive experience.
3. **Arena stage : Also known as the « theatre-in-the-round, »** **the arena stage** is a stage that is completely surrounded by the audience. **Performers enter and exit from all sides, and the audience views the action from all angles.** This type of stage creates an immersive and intimate experience for the audience, but can also be challenging for the performers to navigate.

What was the early source of influence on American drama ?

The early source of influence on American drama was mainly the **European theatrical traditions, particularly the English theater.** **Many early American playwrights were heavily influenced by the works of English dramatists such as William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and John Dryden, as well as by the Italian commedia dell'arte.** Additionally, **the religious** and **cultural values** of early American

society, such as the Puritan emphasis on morality and the belief in the importance of education, also influenced the themes and style of early American drama.

Two kinds of opposition to the development of early American drama ?

Two kinds of opposition to the development of early American drama were religious and cultural opposition.

Religious opposition was mainly from the Puritans who considered the theater to be sinful and corrupting. They believed that the theater was a place of vice and immorality that promoted gambling, drinking, and prostitution. As a result, the Puritans tried to suppress theater performances, and even passed laws that prohibited them.

Cultural opposition, on the other hand, was due to the fact that early American drama was heavily influenced by European theater traditions. Some Americans felt that the theater was not suited to the American way of life, and that it was too foreign and elitist. Others felt that theater was too frivolous and lacked any real cultural or social significance. This cultural opposition made it difficult for American drama to gain a foothold and establish itself as a legitimate art form in the early years.

The title of the first American tragedy written by an American playwright.

What are the name of the playwright and the year of publication of that play ?

The *first American tragedy* written by an *American playwright* is titled « *The Prince of Parthia* » and was written by *Thomas Godfrey*. It was published in *1767*.

The title of the first American comedy written by an American and performed by Americans ?

The *first American comedy* written by an *American* and *performed by Americans* is « *The Contrast* » by *Royall Tyler*. It was first performed in *New York City on April 16, 1787*.

The name of an actor whose acting was characterized by muscular strength and Great vocal power, and who was perhaps the first to popularize the virile outdoor image Cultivated by many American actors ever since. ?

One actor who fits this description is *Edwin Forrest (1806-1872)*. He was known for his *powerful physical* presence on stage and his ability to project his voice to the back of the theater, which made him one of the *most popular actors* of his time. He often played *heroic roles*, particularly those of *Shakespearean characters* like *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

William Shakespeare's plays were among the main pieces of drama performed at the very beginning of American drama. True or false ?

False. *William Shakespeare's plays were not among the main pieces of drama performed at the very beginning of American drama.* American drama began in the early 18th century with **the performance of native-born playwrights such as William Dunlap, Royall Tyler, and Mercy Otis Warren, who wrote plays that reflected American themes and experiences.** It wasn't until the mid-19th century that Shakespeare's plays became more popular in the United States.

Two plays of William Shakespeare performed in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries ?

One of the earliest documented performances of a Shakespeare play in the United States was a production of « **Richard III** » in New York City in 1750. This was followed by many other productions of Shakespeare's plays in the 18th and 19th centuries. Here are two examples :

1. **« Hamlet »** - This play was performed in the United States as early as 1759 and continued to be a popular choice throughout the 19th century. One notable production was by actor Edwin Booth, who performed the role of Hamlet numerous times throughout his career in the mid-1800s.
2. **« Romeo and Juliet »** - This play was also a popular choice for American theaters in the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, the first documented performance of « Romeo and Juliet » in the United States was in 1730, just a few decades after the first American theater was established in Williamsburg, Virginia.

To what extent can we say that the American Revolution was a boost to the creation of a national theatrical discourse ?

The American Revolution had a significant **impact on the creation** of **a national theatrical discourse in the United States**. Prior to the Revolution, theatrical performances in the colonies were often dominated by **European productions** and **themes**. However, **the Revolution** created a **renewed interest in American history and culture**, and this was reflected in the development of American theater.

During the **Revolutionary period**, many **American playwrights** began to create **works that were specifically tailored to American audiences, with themes that reflected American experiences and values**. This helped to establish a distinct national theatrical discourse that was rooted in American culture.

Furthermore, *the Revolution* also led to *an increase in the number of theaters and theatrical productions in the United States*. As more Americans gained access to education and leisure time, they began to demand more diverse and sophisticated forms of entertainment, including theatrical performances. This helped to create a *larger market for American theater and encouraged the growth of a professional theater industry*.

In summary, while the American Revolution was not the sole factor in the creation of a national theatrical discourse in the United States, it played a significant *role in fostering a sense of national identity and promoting the development of American theater*.

Which American playwright has earned the title of « Father of American drama » ? Two of his most successful plays ?

William Dunlap is sometimes referred to as the « *Father of American Theatre* » because of his *significant contributions to the development of theater in the United States, including his work as a playwright, producer, and theater historian*. However, he is not typically referred to as the « *Father of American drama*. »

While *Dunlap* was a prolific playwright, his works were largely derivative of European models and did not have the same impact on American drama as *Eugene O'Neill's groundbreaking plays. O'Neill's works*, which were deeply *influenced* by his *own experiences* and *the social and political climate* of his time, helped to establish a *unique and powerful form of American drama* that was *distinct* from *European traditions*.

That being said, *Dunlap* did play an *important role in the development of American theater*, and his *works* were *significant* in their own right. Some of his *most successful plays* include « *André* » and « *The Father of an Only Child*. »

When was the first Theatrical Syndicate formed in the United States ?

The first Theatrical Syndicate in *the United States* was formed in *1896*. *The syndicate* was a *powerful theatrical monopoly that controlled the booking and production of plays in many American theaters, particularly in the Northeast*. The *founding members* of the *syndicate* were *a group of theater owners and managers* who sought to control the industry and maximize profits by eliminating competition and standardizing the production and distribution of plays.

The Theatrical Syndicate was *controversial* and *faced significant opposition* from **independent producers and playwrights, who accused the group of stifling creativity and monopolizing the industry**. Despite these criticisms, *the syndicate continued to wield significant influence over American theater for several decades, until it was eventually broken up by anti-trust laws in the early 20th century.*

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