
UNIT 16 INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to acquaint you with the history of Western Drama since 1500 and with the characteristics and elements of drama as a “literary” form. After reading this unit carefully, you should be able to:

- trace the development of English and European Drama since 1500,
- define elements of drama,
- read, analyse and enjoy a play.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

In Block 3, we critically analysed *Macbeth*; and in the Units 12-15 of Block 4, we have discussed *A Doll's House*. In this unit, we shall at the outset define drama and its kinds. Then we shall give you a brief history of Western drama since the Renaissance with special emphasis on British drama. Subsequently we shall consider the major elements of drama such as theme, character, plot, dialogue, imagery and symbol, music and sound effects, scenery, properties, costume, light, make-up etc. We have also prepared some exercises for you which you should complete before moving on to the next section.

16.2 WHAT IS DRAMA AND ITS KINDS

16.2.1 What is a Play

A play can be defined after Aristotle as the imitation of an action intended to be represented by actors on the stage. It normally takes up a story of a certain magnitude which has a beginning, a middle and an end and which deals with the lives of human characters who are represented by actors in costume and make-up. A full-length play as distinguished from a one-act play, is normally divided into acts or scenes or both.

16.2.2 Kinds of Drama

Traditionally drama was divided into comedy and tragedy. In the Elizabethan period, tragi-comedy was added to the list. With the revolution in theatre in the modern period, new forms like the dark comedy and metatheatre have emerged. Although you will be

The new drama attained its zenith in the plays of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and lesser luminaries like Kyd, Peele, Greene, Chapman, Marston, Dekker, Heywood, Middleton, Webster, Beaumont and Fletcher. Although the theatre companies were patronised by the highest circles in the Court, the audience represented a cross-section of the London population, ranging from the elite to the groundlings. The plays were performed in the afternoon in the natural light with no scenery, no properties and no actresses — boys playing the female roles.

Christopher Marlowe created the dramatic blank verse in English, as in works like *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Edward the Second* and *The Jew of Malta*, he took up strong and ambitious characters who challenged destiny and defied the conventional Christian ethics. He used a grand style and a high flown manner to depict characters who desire power, profit, pleasure and omnipotence. Kyd, on the other hand, was a master of revenge tragedy whose *The Spanish Tragedy* prepared the ground for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare's own plays can be classified as comedies, history plays, problem plays or dark comedies, Roman plays, tragedies and romances or tragi-comedies. The major comedies like *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the *Twelfth Night* often deal with aspects of love and show an extraordinary felicity on the part of the author in playing with words. The history plays, barring *King John* dramatize a hundred years of English history from the end of the fourteenth century of the Battle of Bosworth, highlighting the themes of order, loyalty and good Government and at the same time they contain the great comic creation — Falstaff. In the problem plays, the vision of Shakespeare darkens considerably. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure* come awfully close to tragedy before their happy endings. *Troilus and Cressida* joins them to the Roman plays which take us into the ancient world of Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus and Titus Andronicus to engage the problems of treason, stratagems and spoils. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* probe into the depths of the human heart and the darkness of evil to ultimately reaffirm a beneficent cosmos. *Hamlet* remains the most intriguing character in drama and *Iago*, the most powerful embodiment of motiveless malignity. From these, he moves to a mood of reconciliation and mellow acceptance in his last plays — Romances like *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

Ben Jonson applied his theory of humours to drama to create characters of humour in compelling comedies like *The Alchemist*, *Every Man in his Humour* and *Volpone*. These characters provide the underpinning to his vitriolic and trenchant exposures of the corruption in society. On the other hand, his Roman tragedies like *Sejanus* and *Catiline* are too formal and too carefully located in the past to offer much of contemporary interest. After him, the quality of drama declined as the Late Jacobean and Caroline Drama is noted for its decadence; scenes of excessive violence, incest and perversity in the plays by Ford — *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* — and Shirley — *The Cardinal* — which far exceed the violence of earlier masterpieces like the *White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* of Webster, amply illustrate this.

16.3.2 Neo-Classical Drama

The Centre of excellence in drama in the meantime shifted to France which became the seedbed for the Neo-Classical movement. This French theatre, on which the Restoration Drama of England was modelled, was essentially a sophisticated theatre inspired by the rules enunciated by Aristotle, especially the unities of time, place and action. The theatre houses were enclosed and the stage was surrounded on three sides by the audience. Artificial lights, sets, and properties were introduced on the stage, and for the first time, women entered it as actresses. On this stage, Corneille and Racine, its great tragic playwrights, dramatized in their contrasting manners the conflict between honour or reason and passion as in the former's *The Cid* and the latter's *Phaedra*. Rhymed Couplets — as also in the other contemporaries — furnished them with the appropriate format to handle historical and mythical themes — in the grand manner in Corneille and with subtle psychological insight in Racine. In contrast, Moliere, the great master of comedies depicted major characters with specific eccentricities — a miser, a hypocrite, (*Tartuffe*), a misanthrope, (*The Misanthrope*) and generated comedy out of their exposure. This was combined with social criticism and a variety of comic devices including disguises, intrigues, farcical action — devices that Dryden, Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve, employed so effectively in plays like *The Man of Mode*, *The Country Wife* and *The Way of the World* for the Restoration stage.

16.3.3 Romantic Drama

During the eighteenth century, the neo-classical comedy of manners jostled with the more sentimental bourgeois comedy to evolve into the mellower and more genteel comedy of Beaumarchais in France and Goldsmith and Sheridan in England. Whereas England entered an arid phase in dramatic literature for about a hundred years, Germany and France witnessed the triumph of Romanticism in the plays of Goethe and Schiller, Hugo and Dumas. The German plays like Goethe's *Goetz von Berlichingen*, *Egmont* and *Faust* and Schiller's *The Robbers*, *Mary Stuart*, *The Maid of Orleans* and *William Tell* celebrated the strong individual heroically opposing tyrannical authority, sometime in total isolation. The romantic love of nature and opposition to the existing systems shine through many of these works. The worthwhile English Romantic plays — Byron's *Manfred* and *Cain* and Shelley's *The Cenci* — similarly glorify rebellious individuals. The Frenchmen, Hugo and Dumas, love to present spectacular actions by superhuman characters in historical or exotic settings in plays like *Cromwell*, *Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Montechristo*.

16.3.4 Modern Drama

Modern drama begins with Ibsen who himself had started as a writer of historical, exuberant and romantic plays. His problem plays of the middle phase like *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* and the later dramas of symbolic and psychological realism such as *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder* aim at verisimilitude and photographic resemblance to reality, trying to reproduce its details in an objective and authentic manner. Not only are the characters, events and dialogues life like, even the symbols are "realistic" at the literal level. The exposition is carefully manipulated, the sets and properties reproduce reality and the sources of light and music are invariably explained in realistic terms. Chekhov, however, thought that Ibsen's plays were too sensational and too carefully contrived to appear natural. In his major plays — *The Sea-Gull*, *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard* — he moved initially towards a drama of "indirect action" and later towards one of "inaction". Not much happens as the characters drift instead of acting vigorously. The dialogues are replaced by long monologues or characters talking at cross purposes. Thus there is no proper communication — a fact also highlighted by the presence of deaf servants and meaningful pauses or moments of silence. Chekhov also spread his action over several years or at least several months, thus eliminating the unconvincing packing of too many events in the short span of one or two days. Above all, he tried to create a mood, an impression, an atmosphere on the stage.

Realism, however, appeared too constricting a form to the other giants of modern drama who rebelled against it in separate ways. Thus the symbolists like Maeterlinck in their stylized, theatrical ways — unlike Chekhov's realistic mode — tried in plays like *The Intruder* and *Pelleas and Melisande* to create an atmosphere on the stage through lights, shadows, sound effects etc. often making us aware of the presence of the unseen and the supernatural. Well before Claudel and Yeats wrote symbolist-impressionist plays in verse, Strindberg revolutionized the stage with his expressionistic-surrealistic plays including *To Damascus*, *The Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata*. Although he started a la Zola in plays like *The Father* and *Miss Julie*, he soon turned to this highly subjective mode of presenting the inner reality, mingling facts with fantasy, distorting the objective, empirical reality. He and the fellow expressionists concentrated on the landscape of the mind, externalising inner conflicts, dreams, reveries, hallucinations are all shown directly to the audience. Time and space dissolve; flashbacks and sudden shifts in time carry us back and forth. Sets are functional, not photographic; spotlights are used imaginatively; and background music enhances the impact of the dialogues. Symbolism is carried to an extreme, and not only sets and properties, but even characters become symbols. After Strindberg and Hauptmann, Expressionism appears in the work of Wedekind, Kaiser and Toller in Germany, O'Casey in Ireland and O'Neill, Rice, Odets, Williams and Miller in America. Surrealism which resembles Expressionism in its opposition to logic and its attention to the reality of the subconscious mind in dreams, hallucinations and reveries appeared in the works of a playwright like Jean Cocteau who in his version of Oedipus, *The Infernal Machine* actually showed the terrible dreams that Jocasta has on her wedding night.

Two major playwrights stand apart from these tendencies — Bernard Shaw and Pirandello. Shaw, who wrote problem plays, discussing contemporary topics in a strikingly witty comic mode e.g. *Arms and the Man*, *Candida* and *Major Barbara*, turned to a dream sequence in *Man and Superman*, Chekhovian impressionism in *Heartbreak House* and again a dream and a juxtaposition of the past and the present in *Saint Joan*. Pirandello, often seen, as a practitioner of the “metatheatre” boldly experiments with the relation between the stage and the audience and the conventions of the theatre as he repeatedly explores the relation between illusion and reality, art and life, mask and face, role and self and the fluid nature of human identity, selecting the format of the play within the play in his best known works like *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*. Many of these motifs furnish the core of the theatre of the Absurd.

Although in the 1930s, 40s and 50s several playwrights attempted plays in verse — Garcia Lorca in Spain and T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry in England — the two dominant movements of the time were the Epic theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd. The epic theatre was the brain child of Bertolt Brecht who created a “Scientific” theatre that would inspire the audience to bring about a change in socio-economic and political situation. He employed a variety of devices to create “*verfremdungseffekt*” — audience alienation or distantiation — on the stage. Narration, prior announcement of the contents of a scene that is enacted, taking up a known story, music that is out of harmony with the dialogue, distancing the play in space and time aim to distance the audience emotionally from the character, and encourage it to weigh the issues carefully and contemplate how the problem dramatized on the stage can be solved by altering the social, political, economic system. However, his finest works — *Mother courage*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *Galileo* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* — showed a fine tension between the attempt to implement the new theory and the unconscious allegiance to the Aristotelean conventions. Later, some English playwrights like John Whiting, Robert Bolt, John Osborne, John Arden and Brendan Behan combined elements of the Epic theatre with other conventions in plays like *The Devils*, *A Man for All Seasons*, *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, *The Entertainer* and *The Hostage*.

The Theatre of the Absurd had a truly varied lineage, ranging from the plays of Chekhov, Strindberg and Pirandello to the philosophies of Sartre and Camus. Like Sartre and Camus, they postulated a Godless, meaningless universe, denounced all absolute values and presented isolated characters who could not communicate with each other. However, whereas Sartre and Camus, clothe their vision in the “Conventional” dramatic modes, the absurdists like Ionesco, Beckett and Adamoff forged a new dramatic form to harmonize with their bizarre view of reality. Pinter and Stoppard in England and Albee in America followed their techniques even as they modified certain features of the mode. In their major works — *The Bald Soprano*, *Rhinoceros*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Professor Taranne* — the Absurdists dispense with plot, strip their characters of their backgrounds, refuse to explain their motivations and mingle fantasy with observation to show unbelievable and bizarre incidents that reveal the absence of a Divine order or a moral universe or any kind of a logical system in the world. The characters have fluid or multiple identities and they are unable to reach out to other characters across the barrier of isolation. The failure to communicate is manifested in two ways — the characters have nothing to communicate and language is an inadequate medium of communication. Often more is conveyed through silences than through dialogues. Extensive use of clichés and meaningless words even leads to the breakdown of language as in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. The settings are often outside specific locales and thus attain universal dimensions, dealing with the human condition which cannot be altered through social or political or economic reforms.

Jean Genet, who is frequently classified as an Absurdist, also provides the links with the Theatre of cruelty, which was conceived and developed by Artaud, before the former took to it. Genet's Pirandellian concern with the themes of illusion and reality, art and life, mask and face, role and self and the motifs of fluid identity and role playing and the device of the play within the play are mixed with an almost morbid interest in violence, sadism and masochism of various kinds — with “Cruelty” as Artaud meant it.

No playwright of the stature of Shaw or Pirandello or Brecht has appeared during the recent decades but it is too early to say that the springs of the theatre have dried up in this age of the Television.

16.4 THEMES

A play has a major theme or related themes. In the process of conveying the moral vision of the author, it says something about human beings, their society and the world and makes statements of an ethical or philosophical kind. Thus among the plays you have read, *Macbeth* deals with the issues of power, crime and guilt, loyalty, evil and so on. *A Doll's House* is concerned with the family as an institution, the position of women and the need to tell the truth, no matter what the consequences are. *Arms and the Man* explores the nature of love, war and snobbery. Tendulkar in *Ghasi Ram Kotwal* attacks conventional social morality and hypocrisy. You will also notice that in a great play, the themes are not single but multiple, though usually carefully interconnected. A propagandist may use the vehicle of drama to convey a clear and simple message and judgement but plays of the highest excellence embody complex and multifaceted views of the moral issues concerned.

16.5 CHARACTERS

Any drama requires human characters, but their conceptions may vary tangibly from one mode to another or one period to another. In a tragedy, the central characters are well rounded figures who possess psychological depth and are capable of surprising us. In contrast the conventional comic characters are flat or two-dimensional. Their actions and behaviours can be predicted, and sometimes they fall into well-known types. Thus in Ben Jonson's comedy of humours, they derive their vibrancy and animation from the humours. In Restoration comedies, there are fops, gulls and other set types. Moliere has a misanthrope or a miser or a hypocrite or a playboy as the main character whose eccentricity becomes the source of the action. Again, a dramatic character may develop or may simply remain static. Thus Ibsen's Nora matures and acquires a new outlook on life, but Shakespeare's Falstaff and Shaw's Nicola do not change. In many plays, masks are used to freeze the characters and make them static to an extent. In all plays, characters are revealed through their actions but often they are also shown through their comments on themselves and each other and especially in the modern period through the playwright's direct analysis of them. As a matter of fact, even costumes, gestures, postures, movements and dialogues depict characters.

16.6 PLOT AND STRUCTURE

The term "structure" of a play refers to its organisation the way in which different parts of it are put together. Not only the pattern and arrangement of scenes and the relation between the main plot and the sub-plots, but also the manipulation of space and time, the parallels and contrasts between characters, and the organisation of the play along certain leitmotifs and recurrent images are included in a discussion of the structure of a play. This structure of a good play is almost invariably related to the overall conception of the play and its dramatic style. Thus Shakespeare generally uses sub-plots to illuminate by comparison and contrast the events in the main plot. He aims at conveying an impression of the richness and opulence of life. In contrast, the more austere art of Ibsen requires a smaller canvas and a lesser number of characters. The playwrights till recently aimed at the creation of suspense and climax but practitioners of the Expressionistic theatre, the Theatre of the Absurd and the Epic theatre unflinchingly eschewed such effects.

16.7 SPEECH AND IMAGERY

Dialogues form the core of drama. Although once verse was the dominant medium in theatre, now prose has become the common vehicle of communication in drama. From the grandiloquent speeches of the Ancient, the Elizabethan and the Romantic periods, we have moved to the "language of the street" of Ibsen and Pinter. Dramatic prose itself spans the concrete, picturesque speeches of J.M. Synge, the lyrical dialogues of Tennessee Williams, the ardent rhetoric of Bernard Shaw and the deadened, mechanical, monotonous language of Beckett. Playwrights also sometimes show the lack of interaction in dialogues to indicate the inability of characters to communicate.

Dramatic dialogues are often replete with metaphors and similes. Sometimes they are recurrent when they come to acquire a lot of significance in the overall meaning and pattern of the play. In theatre, however, dramatic symbols go beyond what occurs in dialogues as often sets, properties, lights acquire symbolic significance. In the Elizabethan theatre, which had a bare stage, all the images are normally clustered in the speeches of the characters. In *Macbeth* the multiple references to light and darkness are scattered through the dialogues. In contrast, in the modern theatre, not infrequently, the dominant symbols are visual as parts of sets or properties like the pistols in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* or the house in Shaw's *Heartbreak House*.

16.8 MUSIC AND STAGE TECHNIQUES: SETS, COSTUMES, LIGHTS, MAKE-UP ETC.

The production of a play also involves music, sets, costumes, lights and make-up. As in many cultures, drama emerged out of musical performances, songs or instrumental music have supplemented dialogues in plays in all periods of drama. In non-realistic theatres the music is generally in the form of background music. Much earlier in the Greek theatre, musical element was central to the play as the chorus sang and danced on the stage. On the other hand, in the realistic theatre of Ibsen and Chekhov, the source of music is always explained in terms of the story of the play. Thus a piano on the stage in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* or a character playing on a violin in a room off stage in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* becomes the source of "realistic" music. Often, other sound effects, contribute to the impact of the play like the sound of the breaking string in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* or that of the shots being fired in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*.

The sets can be realistic as in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* or in Shaw's *Arms and the Man* or spare and symbolic as in Miller's *Death of a salesman* or non-existent as in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Usually, in a well-constructed play, the sets reinforce the meaning and the action of the play. Lighting has changed considerably from the daylight performances of the Elizabethan plays to the highly sophisticated lighting in an expressionistic work like Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Whereas the theatre of realism relies upon simple kinds of stagelights and footlights, the Expressionists and the symbolists extensively employ spotlight, to focus upon certain characters or space on the stage. Costumes and make-up also reinforce the stage effects by enhancing the visual appeal of the play. Usually the make-up of a character or the colour or the cut of his clothes indicates his personality. Related to make-up is the use of masks. Masks, which were an essential ingredient of the Greek stage help the audience to classify a character, and at the same time, they freeze the expression on the face of the character, making it impossible to show his development. They also distinguish the actors/characters from the audience.

Thus a play is a complex and multidimensional art, involving a variety of features and devices.

Self Check Exercise 2

- i) Classify the major characters in *Macbeth*, *Arms and the Man*, *A Doll's House* and *Ghasi Ram Kotwal* as round or flat, individuals or types, unchanging or developing.
- ii) How is Shakespeare's method of revealing his characters in *Macbeth* different from Shaw's *Arms and the Man*?
- iii) How do stage symbols differ from imagery in dialogues?
- iv) How do costumes, make-up and mask reinforce the meaning of the dialogues spoken by the actor?
- v) What is the nature of the impact of the sets, light, music and sound effect on the audience?

16.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt:

- that a play dramatizes on the stage events in the lives of some human characters.
- that drama' can be divided into tragedy, comedy, tragi-comedy and unconventional categories like dark comedy.
- the development of Western Drama, especially English Drama since the Renaissance.
- the nature of themes, characters, plot, dialouges, imagery, music and stage techniques in drama.

16.10 SUGGESTED READING

Although there are many books on drama, you will find the following the most useful at this stage:

Martin Esslin. *An Anatomy of Drama*. New York: Hill and Wong, 1977.

R. Scholes and C. Klaus. *Elements of Drama*. London : Oxford University Press, 1971.

J.L. Styan. *Elements of Drama*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1960.

J.L. Styan. *Dramatic Experience*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1965.

16.11 ANSWERS TO SELF CHECK EXERCISES

Self Check Exercise 1

Hint: Please read Sections 16.2, 16.2.1, and 16.2.2 carefully and answer the questions.

Self Check Exercise 2

Hint: To answer questions i and ii, please refer Blocks 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Hint: To answer questions iii, iv and v, please refer section 16.3.