8.1: What is Drama?
What is Drama?

Sarah-Bernhardt performs as Hamlet, holding poor Yorick's skull (1885) - photo from the Library of Congress (public domain)

Drama as a Genre

Like fiction, drama -- sometimes referred to as a play -- features characters caught up in a plot, or series of events in a storyline. Just like in fiction, the plot is the trajectory of the story. Plays and novels are actually very similar in this way. In fact, some plays have been based on novels, and novels on plays. Yet, whereas the narrator of a novel can spend pages painting a picture of the story’s circumstances for the reader, a play is restricted to the space of the stage and the time frame of a couple of hours. This adds unique considerations for a playwright -- or author who writes plays -- to consider. What strategies are available to the playwright to ensure that the play successfully conveys its intended effects and themes? And how can we most clearly settle upon one definition of drama, considering it manifests in different permutations across cultures?
African drama scholar Ruth Finnegan stressed that, when defining drama across cultures, "[m]ost important is the idea of enactment, of representation through actors who imitate persons and events" (486). In addition to this definition, plot, setting, dialogue, and action are probably the most clearly defining characteristics of drama as genre. These elements will be covered in greater detail in the Elements of Drama section.

A Brief History of Drama

Greece

Most historians agree Western drama originated in Greece as an evolution of religious ritual, probably around the 5th century BCE as an evolution of poetry and song (qtd. Miller 126-7). While more controversial, many scholars believe the first plays probably began when singers in a festival celebrating the Greek God Dionysus/Bacchus began acting out characters in worship songs (Miller 127). Eventually, this developed into increasingly elaborate productions, growing from one actor to several, incorporating props and costumes. By 4th century BCE, drama had become a valued cultural practice in Greece and was in fact considered a civic duty that would help Greek society remain rational through the purgation of negative emotion, which Aristotle called catharsis (Scodel 40). By seeing actors acting out intense emotions and brutal acts, it meant Athenian citizens could vicariously experience those emotions, emptying themselves of such emotions so they could focus on their civic duties like voting. Eventually, Athenian citizens would gather every year to watch playwrights akin to celebrities compete against one another (Scodel 40). Many critics argue Greek drama was one of the heaviest influences on William Shakespeare's works, and most poets of the Western world.
India

Some scholars contend drama did not begin in Greece, as popularly assumed, but in India. Or perhaps that drama was not necessarily a spreading phenomena, but a simultaneous evolution in both India and Greece. Regardless, around the same time of the origins of Greek drama arose the Sanskrit Indian prakarana (Walker 7). Prakarana is a play in five acts. This prakarana theatre is widely regarded to have begun the spread of drama in the East in the same way Greek drama spread through the West.

Common Genres of Drama

• Comedy: probably the first drama subgenre, comedy traditionally features lower-class characters, emphasizes silly or bawdy themes, and often features marriage.
• Tragedy: what Aristotle considered the artistic height of drama, Tragedy depicts a protagonist's downfall due to his or her own tragic flaw, or hamartia. Readers can usually recognize a tragedy by its noble characters, elevated language (iambic pentameter), and scenes of suffering and death. They almost always feature death or many deaths and/or a funeral.
• History: recreates a historically significant event. May include elements of comedy or tragedy.
• Romance: usually focuses on love between characters

Distinguishing Features of Drama

• Meant to be performed rather than read
• Emphasis on dialogue, character, and stage direction
• May include elements of music, dance, art, poetry, and prose
• Usually fictional, though may include nonfiction or be inspired by true stories or historical events

Supplemental Videos

• Crash Course Theatre #7: Ancient Sanskrit Theatre
Contributors and Attributions

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Works Cited


