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# Drama: Definition, Genres And Conventions

As a specific mode of fiction, Drama is different from the two previously introduced literary forms of expression (i.e. Prose Fiction and poetry) in that it is enacted (though there are some types of drama which are meant to be read). Dramatic arts, the rules which govern their performance on stage or even the very construction of dramatic texts, are conventionally designed according to “some collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception” (Weidmann, 2009). From the classical Athenian Sophocles, up to the contemporary works of Beckett and Pinter, western drama has evolved to cover different movements and philosophical orientations, and engendered some of the finest masterpieces of world literature.

## Defining Drama

The word “Drama”, is originally a Greek word meaning “to do”. It follows that Drama (in its artistic sense) is always associated with such concepts as “performance”, “action”, “actors” and “stage”.

Though -technically- drama is an independent third mode of literary expression (besides prose and poetry), It shares with them the language properties, as it is either expressed in prose or verse. However, it is different in that it is usually in a dialogue form.

A dramatic text contains many elements which are equally found in fiction, such as plot, characters, themes .etc. This structure, which is suggested by the playwright himself, constitutes the primary text. However, when taken to the stage to be performed by actors and guided by a stage director, it (the primary text) evolves into what is called a secondary text, which gives life to the characters (*dramatis personae*), stage direction and to scene descriptions.

## Dramatic Genres

The oldest examples of dramatic genres can be retraced to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (335 BC). Though he primarily made the distinction between the two major genres, several other subgenres have been suggested ever since.

The two main Genres are the Tragedy and Comedy. Accordingly, the two masks associated with theatre symbolize of the ancient Greek Muses representing each Genre: Thalia (the laughing face, the Muse of comedy), and Melpomene (the weeping face, Muse of tragedy).

### 1. The Tragedy

In *Poetics*, the tragedy is defined as:

The imitation in dramatic form of an action that is serious and complete, with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith it effects a catharsis of such emotions. The language used is pleasurable and throughout appropriate to the situation in which it is used. (Aristotle, 335 B.C).

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What characterizes the tragedy above all is the tragic hero, or the noble personage the plot revolves around. The Tragic Hero is 'better than ourselves,' according to Aristotle, he is a central character of a high stature and greatness, and the actions he performs are noble actions. The fall of the tragic hero has to arouse in the audience (or readers) the emotions of pity or fear.

Nevertheless, this greatness doesn't mean "perfection", because, one of the characteristics of the tragic hero is his tragic flaw (such as hubris, which is often excessive pride or passion), and also hamartia (some errors) which lead to his downfall.

Additionally, some other central features of the Aristotelian archetype include:

1. Free choice: The hero's downfall is his own fault, the result of his own free choice, not of pure accident or some overriding malevolent fate (the paranormal element is usually discarded from the perfect drama conception).
2. The punishment usually exceeds the crime: though the tragic hero is inevitably imperilled, his misfortune is not wholly deserved, as he remains despite his tragic flaw, admirable.
3. The tragic fall is not pure loss: though it may result in the hero's death, before it, there is an increase of awareness, some gain in self-knowledge or, as Aristotle puts it, some 'anagnorisis' (discovery).
4. Catharsis and emotional release: Though it arouses earnest emotion (pity and fear, according to Aristotle), tragedy (when well performed) does not leave its audience in a state of depression. Instead of that, the main feeling which must be experienced in the tragedy is the purgation and purification of the audience's strong emotions (Catharsis).

Tragedies are of numerous kinds, to mention some, there is the Senecan Tragedy (five-acts stage play which is recited rather than performed), the Revenge Tragedy (which was very popular during the Renaissance era and revolves around murder and revenge), The Domestic Tragedy (about middle-class characters and mainly targeting the feeling of empathy instead of fear), and the Modern Tragedy (the loose modern conventions are employed instead of the classical ones).

## 2. The Comedy

Comedies are essentially characterized by their depiction of human nature: Unlike tragedies, comedies are much more concerned with weakness and human limitation than greatness and individuality. If laughter, which has always been associated with the "comic element", expresses something, then it is the acknowledgement of irrationality and absurdity in humans.

In this regard, it should be remarked that the purpose of comedy is not just to divert and entertain the audience, but it also helps to "illuminate human nature and weaknesses by subtly reassuring the audience that even a disaster is something we can laugh about".

Another difference which distinguishes the comedy from the tragedy, is that it (the comedy) is primarily social in nature; the protagonist is always representative of a group, and thus is an archetypal account of "commonness". This is why comedies are named after the "type" the protagonist represents (unlike the tragedy which is usually named after the Tragic Hero)

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As to the conventional progression of the comedy, the plot does not require an organic unity, and events are not always designed in a plausible way. Oftentimes, coincidence is what characterized events progression.

Comedies are of many kinds, some are created to criticise political practices (Satires), some are meant to ridicule the artificial behaviour of the higher social class (comedies of manners), farces are also very common and they are about exaggerated and caricatured characters, plots or behaviours, and melodramas, which reinforce romantic or sensational plots with musical elements.

## **Dramatic Conventions**

Though the primary aim of Dramatic arts is to bring real life onto the stage, it is impossible to reality as it is. Thus , drama is considered as a representation of an “illusion of reality”, performed thanks to some “unrealistic devices”, or “dramatic conventions” which are widely accepted by audience.

Dramatic conventions are defined as a set of “necessary or convenient devices, widely accepted by the public, for solving problems imposed by a particular artistic medium in representing reality” (ref), such as instances of characters talking to themselves, or dialogues held in verse (it is a classical convention), the three walls of the stage...etc.

Conventions cover a wide range of dramatic elements, they could involve the plot organisation, the characterization of actors and personas, ...etc. Once again, and similarly to prose and poetry, dramatic works do not need to conform to any pre-existing conventional type, but what matters is how effectively a playwright makes use of these conventions to achieve an organic unity of the work.

### **Dramatic conventions include:**

- a. Prologues: the introductory part of the play, which serves as an initial situation (as it foreshadows the events and gives the play’s background). It could take the form of an opening scene, a speech or an address. Prologues have the objective of preparing the audience, introducing the actions and characters.
- b. Epilogues: This is the direct opposite of the prologue. It is presented at the end of the play, and it sums up the action of the play and in some cases, makes a statement (an advice or a lesson to be learnt) on the action or events presented in the play.
- c. Interludes: similar to the prologue and epilogue, it is an address presented between the different acts or scenes. In some plays, the interlude can include some brief presentations and entertaining shows.
- d. Soliloquies: this is a dramatic device which was very common during the Renaissance years. A soliloquy is used to reveal the thoughts or the feelings of some characters (especially the central characters). It serves as a subjective narrative perspective as it allows characters to speak aloud, and it is equally used to provide commentaries on major events of the play.

## **Special Forms of Drama**

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## **The Opera**

Operas are a very special form of dramatic art; they are tightly connected with (western) classical music. Throughout the four past centuries, the Opera was influenced by many factors which led to its current form. But probably the most complete format is the one influenced and created by the German 19th century composer Richard Wagner, who tried to create a balance between Greek drama and classical music, giving it the name of 'music dramas'.

## **The Pantomime**

This is a very popular and entertaining form of Drama, conceived in the tradition of fables and folk tales. Pantomimes pay tribute to moral issues and culminate into universal themes. Pantomime are performed through "stock characters" represented through symbolic masks (commedia del arte). Those stock characters encompass the good, the evil, the troubadour, the lover... etc.

## **Conclusion**

Theatre and theatrical appreciation are culture-bound, since what is considered as a mere form of literary expression or as a means of story-telling in one culture, is taken as an indispensable aspect of the cultural life, similar to other spiritual practices in another. Either ways, readers of the genre must be attentive above all, to the both the broad thematic concepts and the narrow ones which lead people to question their ethical and moral senses.