

The Elizabethan Drama and Theatre

THE HISTORY

Miracle plays (13th century onward) - treated the legends of the saints. May have evolved from alternating songs from church or were merely a spontaneous expression of the dramatic inclination of individual artists.

Moralities (15th century) - medieval dramatic pieces in which personified abstractions, such as vices and virtues, are presented on stage.

The **interludes** (15th and 16th century) - one-act dramatic pieces, which dealt with a single episode in which comic and farcical elements prevail, explored only secular contents. (*John Heywood, John Skelton*)

Mature secular dramas (16th century onward) - were written in the form of the traditional classical comedy. (*Nicholas Udall's "Ralph Roister Doister"; "Gammer Gurton's Needle" performed by the Cambridge students*)

The first fully developed **tragedy** (16th century onward) - was built on the model of a Senecan tragedy. (*Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's "Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex"* The subject is taken from chronicles told by Geoffrey of Monmouth; the events not shown on the stage are narrated in blank verse.)

Masques (16th and 17th century) - plays that combined various arts, such as music, dancing, masks, spectacular scenes, which predominated over plot and character. They were comic in spirit and seldom treated serious themes. (*Francis Beaumont, Thomas Middleton, George Chapman, Ben Johnson*)

THE UNIVERSITY WITS

Under strong influence of the Latin playwright **Seneca**, who took his subjects from the Greek drama. Less emphasis on the unity of dramatic dialogue, fewer chorus songs. Not interested in the action, more detailed in creating a dramatic tension by words; however, unrealistic usage of monologue, a rhetorical and pathetic chorus, and an exaggerated disastrous event with horrific climax.

His influences on the Elizabethan drama: the unity of theme, the machinery of tragic spectacle, the introduction of ghosts, and the five-act structure.

The characteristics of the University Wits:

1. A fondness for heroic or tragic themes, in which they treated the lives of great men.
2. Rich language (usage of figures of speech for extreme scenes of violent emotions and actions).
3. Scarcity or complete lack of humour.
4. University education; freelance literates or employed by the court.

The representatives:

John Lyly - helped to create a comedy: a love story in formal, literary language, a thin plot, gay songs, allusion to contemporary life.

George Peele - wrote chronicles, satires, and tragedies. Masterly handling of blank verse, and some fine lyrical touches.

Robert Greene - showed a fair amount of humour, presented female characters in disguise (both influenced Shakespeare).

Thomas Nash - finishing Marlowe's *The Tragedy of Dido*.

Thomas Lodge - collaboration with Shakespeare on *Henry VI*.

Christopher Marlowe - had a great poetic gift and his powerful blank verse influenced Shakespeare. *Tamburlaine The Great; Edward II; The Jew of Malta; The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* - man's intellectual potentialities combined with the myth of a human making a pact with the devil. The inner struggle of the individual for power and spiritual freedom, for knowledge and goodness evolves into the search for the unattainable. Structurally weak (however, some strong points in the beginning and the end), but excellent in form: smoothly running blank verse.

THE REVENGE TRAGEDY

The characteristics:

1. Romantic plot, dealing with crime (its consequences) and man's suffering. The protagonist as a vengeful violent oppressor, the antagonist as a victim. A number of murders in the end ("a tragedy of blood").
2. The influences: Seneca, traditional, religious plays, and the Italian novellas.
3. The themes: lust, jealousy, ambition, revenge.

4. The main character overpowering the passion of revenge, compensation for cruelty is the irony, with which the characters accompany their evil deeds.
5. A moral crisis takes place in the final development, subordinated to the irony.
6. Questioning the relationship between man's personal honour and feudal lawlessness; between tyranny and man's resistance to it; God's providence and the right of human vengeance (antagonism: the avenger believes in moral law, but breaks it).

The representatives:

Thomas Kyd - lacks the intellectual brilliance, but offers a firm structure. Influenced Shakespeare's treatment of revenge, "machinery of plot", and also, to some extent, the development of character. *The Spanish Tragedy* - bombastic language, euphuisms, blank verse. Some aspects of the plot are reminiscent of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

John Webster - incorporated also a subtle analysis of his characters, but his plots have a highly coincidental nature and are thus some more unconvincing. Great poetic skills. *The White Devil; The Duchess of Malfi* - the grotesque mixture of comedy and tragedy.

Cyril Tourneur - tried to involve the audience into the action. *The Revenger's Tragedy; the Atheist's Tragedy*.

Thomas Middleton and William Rowley - *The Changeling*.

John Marston - *Malcontent*.

OTHER PLAYWRIGHTES

Ben Jonson. The first poet-laureate, the first published playwright.

Every Man Out of his Humour; Volpone, or the Fox; The Alchemist; Bartholomew Fayre - comedies full of masterly dialogues, merry incidents, rather effectively built, and in accordance with the unities of time and place.

Sejanus his Fall; Catiline - tragedies, artistically weaker than his comedies (poor character portrayal, dull conversations).

Masque of Queens; Love Resorted; Pleasure Reconciled to Vertue - masques.

Rejected mixing of comedy and tragedy, his plays show his learning, versatility, humour, mannered style, an insight into contemporary life.

George Chapman. Plays full of rhetorical speeches and show weakness of character presentation and plot.

Thomas Dekker. Plays show vivid realism, lyrical pathos, and a powerful portrayal of women. (*The Shoemaker's Holliday*)

Thomas Heywood. Historical plays, domestic tragedies, and romantic comedies.

Collaborations: **Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher; Fletcher and Massinger**.

The Theatre

The public theatres had circular arenas, a stage was set at one end of the open courtyard and the auditorium was open to the sky.

The private theatres were enclosed halls with the stage lightened by candles, lamps or torches (plays were given during the night). Either circular or octagonal, the playhouses had three tiers of balconies surrounding the pit, where the stage was set. Called the "apron stage" due to the platform, which consisted of the front or main stage. Gallery above, the upper stage, was used for balconies, walls of cities. Below the gallery were curtains, which were occasionally drawn back so that a rear or inner stage was provided.

The first theatre built in London by James Burbage, in 1576, was located outside the city jurisdiction, so the mayor and council had no right concerning the theatre. It was called "The Theatre". Soon, another theatre "The Curtain" was built by Richard Farrant. "The Rose", owned by Philip Henslowe, kept the detailed record of all the expenses and sources of income, which are now an important insight to that time. "The Globe", later own by Shakespeare and Heminge, was a model for a number of theatres built later on.

Shakespeare was among the Lord Chamberlain's Men group of actors (later the King's Men), a rival with the Lord Admiral's Men of Henslowe.

The Theory of Drama

THE STAGING

To be successfully staged, a play must observe certain rules:

- short and intense (the maximum of realization):
- limitation opposed on the subject-matter (not everything can be efficiently presented);
- the Aristotle's three unities (of time, place, and action).

'Poetic' or 'closet' plays lack the speed of the action, and are thus intended for reading at home. They include long poetic descriptions and soliloquies, flat characterization, looser structure - all of which makes them less efficient when they are staged. (*Shelley's Prometheus Unbound; Byron's Manfred*)

THE STRUCTURE

The techniques of drama:

- The **analytical technique**: presents the parts of the story directly preceding the conflict and catastrophe. There are also events, which had happened prior to the beginning of the play and have a direct influence on the outcome, but they are usually completely revealed in the denouement. (*Sophocles' Oedipus; Ibsen's plays*)
- The **synthetic technique**: demands that the action of the play develops entirely on the stage; there is no real conflict when the play begins. (*Shakespeare's plays*)

The traditional parts of drama:

1. The **exposition**. Informative and static function. Learn about the main characters (their beliefs and problems). Produces tension with the oppositions. Establishes the atmosphere (the mood) of the play. Shows the dramatic skill of the author (creating the atmosphere, arousing interest). The audience gets acquainted with the characters.
 - (*King Lear, 1. 1; Hamlet, 1. 1 - 2*)
2. The **first crisis or the conflict**. May be a physical happening on stage, a mental decision, or even a natural catastrophe. Startling, unusual development gives rise to a crisis, which leads to other actions and events. The characters are revealed in a new light. The action becomes more complex. The latent conflict of the story becomes palpably true. Must bear the essence of the dramatic opposition in the story (not giving the key to the solution of the problem, it must open possibilities).
 - (*Othello, 1. 3: discourse between Iago and Roderigo; Julius Caesar, 2. 1: the decision of Brutus to kill Caesar*)
3. The **climax**. The problem is completely laid out. The opposition between the protagonist and the antagonist reaches its peak.
 - (*Romeo and Juliet, 3. 5: the nuptial night; Macbeth, 3. 4: he cannot live in peace; King Lear, 3. 1 & 3. 2*)
4. The **denouement (resolution)**. The climax is resolved. Past actions are explained. New evidence is brought to light. The relationships among the characters are revealed. Consists of the tragic moment and the moment of retardation. The tragic moment: is an additional moral burden on the hero (either an obstacle in his struggle to reach his aim or a moment which emphasizes and speeds up his decline). (*Hamlet: killing of Polonius*) The moment of retardation: can be moral (the audience realizes that the play might not end tragically) or technical (scenes are introduced to prevent the story from coming to the catastrophe too suddenly).
 - (*King Lear, 5. 3: Edmund tries to save King Lear and Cordelia, and explains his relation to Goneril and Regan; Romeo and Juliet, 5. 2 - 3: Fair John fails to deliver the letter to Romeo*)
5. The **catastrophe**. By some discovery, the action comes to an end. The final battle between two opposing forces is settled.

The scene and act division:

- Greek drama: pauses when the chorus has its say
- French drama: new scene when a character enters or leaves the stage (movements)
- Latin playwright Seneca: introduced five acts (influential on Elizabethan and Jacobean period)

If a play is divided into acts, the suspense must be carried from one act to another. The actor before leaving the stage must be given a chance to make a strong impression. (*Hamlet, 1. 5: Hamlet's words to Horatio and Marcellus*)

THE PLOT

A plan, an outline of the events of the story must be constructed so that it could be retold in a few sentences. The events must be placed in the environment, which will make them seem more effective and significant, and provide them with the greatest force possible.

Conventions for the selection of the events, which must convey:

1. The author's attitudes to the problems, his views on life.
2. The author's purpose, the message he wants to convey to the public.
3. The artistic taste of the period.

Conventions for the construction of the events:

1. A play should be simple in construction and should move with considerable speed.
2. The plot must be closely constructed.
3. The events must follow in the natural and logical sequence of things.
4. The scenes must be inevitable.
5. The play must develop from one crisis to another.

Variations in the plot structure:

1. The **flash-back technique**. The chronological sequence of the events is altered.
2. The **subplots**. Adding interest to some aspect of the main plot, or introducing an emotional relief. (*King Lear: Gloucester and his two sons*)
3. The **coincidences**. Aristotle suggested as few as possible. Good playwrights try to achieve the appearance of possibility, because they should bear some verisimilitude, likeness to truth. Inconsistency in a character more disturbing than that in the plot. (*Romeo and Juliet: Capulet's Clown asks Romeo to read the invitation to the masked ball, Fair John does not deliver the letter to Romeo in time*)
4. The **contrast**. Heightens the emotional intensity. In Shakespeare: the character of a fool. (*King Lear: the Fool; Hamlet: the Grave-diggers; Macbeth: the "Porter scene"*)
5. The **surprise**. Reveals the true reactions of the characters. In Shakespeare: disguise. (*The Merchant of Venice*)
6. The **significant silence**. Measure the impact of what has been said by a character, and intensifies the meaning of his words. (*Hamlet, 1. 2: after Claudius' speech*)
7. The **dramatic irony** (double meaning). Applies to any play in which the audience is expected to know the outcome. Conflict between the two dramatic expressions: what is going on on the stage, and what is in the spectator's mind. Suggestions made on stage produce the effect of movement in time. The author alters the tone of speech, the speed, and the movements on the stage. (*Hamlet, 1. 2:*
KING: ... But now my cousin Hamlet, and my son -
HAMLET: A little more than kin, and less than kind.
KING: How is it that the clouds still hang on you,
HAMLET: Not so, my lord, I am too much in the "son".)
8. The messengers, letters, or discussions about characters which are not present. Plot material which cannot be conveniently shown on stage. (*Hamlet: Hamlet's letter to Horatio; Julius Caesar: the discussion of Brutus and Cassius About Caesar*)

THE CHARACTERS

Individuals with traits valid for a large group of people. Should be portrayed in such a way that they can be psychologically explained. Should be clear, unambiguous, yet open to several possible interpretations. If presented in a wholly bad light, the character is not persuasive (should possess also some good features) and vice-versa.

Types of characters:

- Minor characters (usually flat types). A stock character is called one dimensional: has only one characteristic feature prevailing.
- Major characters. A round character embodies both general and individual characteristics.

Revealing character's characteristics:

1. The **soliloquy** (monologue).

- Artificial device expresses sincerity (direct, honest expression of his thoughts, feeling). It shows that the character really knows himself. (*Julius Caesar, 2. 1: Brutus' soliloquy*)
- Reveals a hypocrite. In other scenes the character expresses different notions and is revealed in a true light in the soliloquy. (*Othello, 1. 3: Iago's soliloquy*)
- Asserts complexity and irrationality. (*Hamlet, 3. 1: Hamlet's meditation on death*)
- 2. The dialogue of a character.
 - What the character is saying, who is he speaking to, what is his relationship towards the character he is addressing, what are his motives, what aims is he trying to achieve.
- 3. The dialogue about a certain character.
 - Must also take into account intentionally misleading observations.
- 4. The introduction of a confidant.
 - A person who is entrusted with character's private affairs or secrets. (*Hamlet: Horatio; Romeo and Juliet: the Nurse*)
- 5. The character's actions.
 - Taken into account the very simplest and smallest gestures.
- 6. The relationship among various characters.
- 7. The outward expressions of a character.
 - The mimicry, gesture, movement, clothing.

THE DIALOGUE

The language should differ according to the type of a person; nevertheless it should be rich and metaphorical in style, and condense in speed. Characters must be communicative, because every idea must be conveyed by means of speech. In modern plays there is a use of colloquial, everyday speech (full of clichés, meaningless exclamations, repetitions).

The difference in genres:

1. Comedy: fast in speed, witty language.
2. Tragedy: slow in speed, graceful language (full of thoughts, arguments, and persuasion).

The functions:

1. It conveys a meaning.
2. An aesthetic function. Pleases with its beauty.

The asides reveal the character's thoughts.

THE CHORUS

Derives from Greek drama. Function: to tell the audience about the past, to comment on the present, express forebodings about the future. Acts as an audience, although being the mouthpiece for the author. In Elizabethan drama, minor characters take over the function of chorus. (*Hamlet: Horatio and the Grave-diggers*)

The usage:

1. A hindrance. Stops the action, discusses the preceding developments on the stage.
2. An alienation effect between the action taking place on the stage and the (emotional) perception of the audience.

THE FUNCTIONS OF PROSE AND VERSE DRAMA

Poetry in drama: the play is removed one step further from literal realism. The language must stay dramatic, and give stimulus to the action.

Poetry advantages:

- expresses general truths more adequately;
- the imagery gives broader implications;
- effectively used in monologues;
- secure the depth and intensity (provides a wider range of the speaker's feelings).

Poetic drama: need not to be in verse, use of the figurative language.

Verse drama: use of a certain metrical pattern in the everyday language.

T. S. Eliot's "Poetry and Drama":

1. The poetry is merely a decoration. (If only the pleasure of listening to it, it is superfluous.)
2. It must justify itself dramatically.
3. Plays should not be written in poetry, if prose is dramatically adequate.

T. S. Eliot's "The Three Voices of Poetry":

1. The poet talking to himself (nobody).
2. The poet addressing the audience. (the dramatic monologue)
3. The poet creating a dramatic character addressing another imaginary character. (the impersonal voice)

THE DRAMATIC MEANING

What happens in the mind of a character is not the same as what happens in the mind of the audience (=dramatic irony). Achieved if the play has in itself many meanings so that there is a wide variety of possible interpretations.

The meaning of a play (as opposed to the plot) is based on impressions gathered throughout the play. Single impression is static, but a number of shifting impressions produce the effect of movement in time. An impression should be presented so that we acknowledge its relevance, and associate it with the following impression.

THE EVALUATION

The evaluative factors:

1. The value of the work itself: its aesthetic value, the relevance of the subject-matter treated.
2. The communicative value: the possibility of communication and production of similar emotions in the consumer of a work of art as had inspired the author.

The truth of the literary work (whether we accept the things we are told).

The greater the possibility of interpretation, the richer the play (adding meanings).

T. S. Eliot's "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism":

In Shakespeare: for the simplest auditors there is plot, for the more thoughtful the character and conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, for auditors of greater understanding and sensitiveness a meaning which reveals itself gradually.

The Aristotle's Concept of Tragedy

Tragedy is a mimesis (an imitation, a representation, a reproduction) of an action, which is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain length; it is expressed in a speech made beautiful in different ways in different parts of a play; it is acted, not narrated; and by exciting pity and fear, it gives a healthy relief to such emotions.

- external (physical happenings) and inner (acting of words and ideas) action (*all Shakespeare's tragedies*)
- **serious** = the subject-matter is worth being presented (*all Shakespeare's tragedies*)
- a **certain length** = performed as one whole, closely knitted, no additional plots (the unity of action)
- **speech made beautiful** = the direction, the choice of words and the way they are put together, differs from the everyday language (*all Shakespeare's tragedies*)
- **pity** is present in the observer and the play gives a healthy relief to the excess of these emotions, liberating and ennobling the observer (*all Shakespeare's tragedies*)
- the tragedy should be fundamentally true to life: contradictions between his weaknesses and his courage (*Hamlet*), or man's stupidity and his nobility (*Othello*)
- surprise should not be an element of drama
- must possess suspense (created with the help of language and structure) and tragic irony
- catharsis = the moment of reversal and recognition > the fate of a character changes, he realizes that he has been working towards his own ruin > the greatest tragedy lies in the hero's actions or decisions as well (the tragic error) (*The Merchant of Venice, Othello, Hamlet, King Lear...*)

- the realisation of the tragic error gives the audience hope that goodness will be restored, yet that does not happen
- the characters should not be either too good or too bad (goodness derives not from moral quality but from strength and intensity of someone's mental or moral nature)
- the three unities of time, place, and action (*Othello*)
- characters are taken from a higher social class (*all Shakespeare*)
- the story is based on a historical myth which is know to many people (*Macbeth, Julius Caesar, King Lear*)