

4. Drama - about

Theater is what we watch on stage. **Drama** is the script we read, that which the actors perform, the text that the **playwright** creates.

Drama is literature that actors perform, but it has many similarities to poetry and prose. The plays of Molière and Shakespeare, for example, are written in verse. The Spanish playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo has deep symbolism that could be found in many poems and novels. The use of language and literary devices is fundamental to all three literary genres.

Even though theater is a **mimesis**, an imitation of real life, actors perform (**enact**) on stage and interpret the drama. These interpretations may vary according to the actor and director of the play, but the **stage directions** (instructions in the text of a play to guide actors in their performance and directors in their overseeing) are more explicit in what they want to happen on stage.

4.1. Drama - plot

The general structure of the **plot** is the same as with short story and the novel: *exposition, development, crisis* and *denouement*, as we have seen before.

The **exposition**, when things are established in the beginning, is crucial to the entire play. Here we discover the background information:

- Setting (place and time)
- Events that have already occurred important to the plot
- Information about the characters

This can be done through a narrator that tells us information that happened before the plays, through the dialogue of the characters, via flashbacks, thoughts or other means of stage direction.

The **development** (rising action) of the plot, is the longest part of the plot and the most important because they set up the series of events that lead to the climax.

These events are not supposed to be predictable and complications arise that make the play interesting. Sometimes new information is presented or there is a plan that fails, but these elements should create a **crisis** that will push the development to a point of confrontation.

This point of confrontation is the **climax**, when the crisis reaches its high point. This is where things are revealed, understood, or actions are taken that change the course of events. This culmination of events changes the main character's fate. If it's a tragedy, what was going well turns for the worse; if it's a comedy, things usually turn for the better.

After the climax, there is the resolution, for good or bad, depending on what type of play it is. The mid-stage of this process is often called the **falling action**, when the tensions between the protagonist and the antagonist settle, with one winning over the other.

And the final stage is the **denouement** (*untying*) of events, where the conflicts find their **resolution**. Here, readers can experience a sense of **catharsis**, or release of emotions and tension.

As mentioned, in the crisis there is a turn of events: in the resolution in a comedy the protagonist has a happy ending and the antagonist may become “good”; in a tragedy, the protagonist(s) may die or suffer loss.

To see **examples** of this, think about the **comedy** *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which the lovers are united in the end and the enemies reconcile. Now think about a **tragedy**, *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the two protagonists die at the end of the play.

4.2. Drama - characters

In regards to the **characters** of drama, as in the novel and the short story, we have the *protagonist* and the *antagonist*. That person might be *individualist* or *representative* of a larger group or actions.

Traditional characters are supposed to act within the restrictions of their social class (**decorum**).

We also have **foil** characters, which serve as a contrast to make the protagonist's characteristics stand out.

We also have the **stock characters** for the background, those that fulfill a stereotypical or archetypical role and that are known for their flatness and lack of development.

We also have a **narrator**, which can be embedded in the background to serve as a communicator between the action and the audience. In older plays, particularly the Greek tradition, this might serve as the **chorus**.

4.3. Drama - theme

In regards to the **theme** of play, there are universal objects, regardless of the time and space of the drama (setting), with which we as spectators/ readers can identify. We recognize characters like ourselves, and their outcome could be a warning or a prediction of our own future actions.

4.4.1. Drama – types of plays: comedy

The tradition of **comedy** is to entertain the audience and see a happy ending. There is **low comedy**, which highly depends on action and is humorous and **farcical** with sometimes vulgar humor, and **high comedy**, which has a more sophisticated plot and language, with a dialogue that involves wit and “polite” interactions.

There are several types of comedies. The **romantic comedy** involves love and a happy ending. This is common in Shakespeare and in the Elizabethan tradition, like in the aforementioned *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

There is the **comedy of manners**, which deals with upper-class society, like, for example dandies, jealousy, frivolity, etc. An example of this is *The Conscious Lovers*, by Richard Steele, characterized by exaggeration and melodramatic effect.

There is also the **tragicomedy**, a cross between tragedy and comedy that contains elements of both. It can be tragedy with some comic relief, for example, or a tragedy with a happy ending. An example of this is Anton Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

The **sentimental comedy** has both sentimental tragedy and comedy, and is characterized by interactions of extreme emotional expression and pity. An example of this is Ben Johnson's *Every Man in His Humor*, a play of suspicions and suppositions.

4.4.2. Drama – types of plays: satire

Satire is an across-the-board mode that can be seen in drama, poetry, fiction and non-fiction. It is a literary mode that uses humor, ridicule and irony to expose, criticize or denounce evil, stupidity and vices of people, institutions or beliefs, usually in politics or other contemporary issues. In the literary genre of drama, this would correspond to *high comedy*.

Satire uses irony, parody, hyperbole, understatement, sarcasm, wit, inversion and other literary techniques. Let's run through these characteristics (some we have already seen):

- Irony – using opposite language to create effect (ex- WWI was the “war to end all wars”)

- Parody – an exaggerated imitation of a writer, artist or genre for comic outcome (ex – *Don Quixote* is a parody of the chivalric novels)
- Hyperbole – exaggeration (ex – “I have a million things to do today”)

- Understatement – presenting something as smaller or less important than it is (ex – describing a gunshot wound as a “scratch”).
- Sarcasm – mocking with irony (ex – “Where is the flood?” If someone wears pants that are too short.)

- Wit – mental sharpness and inventiveness
- Inversion (anastrophe) – the normal order of words is reversed to attain a desired meter or effect (ex – “To class, I will go”).

An example of a modern satire that is easily understood is Bert V. Royal's *Dog Sees God: Confessions of a Teenage Blockhead*. The name alone says a lot, but it's a satire of the famous *Peanuts* characters by Charles M. Schulz, showing the characters how they are when they grow up. You can imagine how some of these characteristics of satire come alive in this play.

4.4.3. Drama – types of plays: tragedy

A **tragedy** is characterized by a series of tragic events and an unhappy ending, and the protagonist usually suffers or dies as a result. Sounds depressing, but it has an ulterior function. A tragedy, as Aristotle defined it, should provoke an emotional response in the audience (reader), one of compassion, for example, to create a **catharsis**.

In a tragedy the **tragic hero** is traditionally a noble and upright figure that has a **tragic flaw** (also called **hamartia**) which is often **hubris** (personal pride) or a lack of judgment, which leads to a culminating catastrophe.

Although the ending is tragic and seemingly depressing, the protagonist is redeemed in some way, and the audience learns from his/her faults, thus restoring order to any universal concept of “good” or “truth”.

The tragedies stem from the Greek tradition, most known with Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Perhaps the most known in *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles.

Of course, tragedies have been written ever since. William Shakespeare well known for some of his tragedies, especially *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Perhaps the most popular modern tragedy is *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller.

4.4.4. Drama – types of plays: historical drama

The **historical drama** is a drama about a famous historical figure or event. Shakespeare wrote many of these, like *King Lear* and *Henry V*.

Since Shakespearean times there have been many historical dramas, but many, if not most, are nationalistic and biased.

4.4.5. Drama – types of plays: modern drama

With **modern drama** we see a whole new type of play that involve scientific, social, psychological and artistic elements previously undeveloped in Western thought. This type of drama emerged toward the end of the 19th century and evolved well into the 20th century.

Some **modern playwrights** that pertain to this type of genre are Tennessee Williams, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, Samuel Beckett, Oscar Wilde, Jean-Paul Sartre, Eugène Ionesco, Fernando Arrabal y Federico García Lorca, to name a few.

Modern drama stretched the limits of thought and expression to try to define reality, or give it new meaning. An emphasis on **Realism**, like with Ibsen, strove to seek truth or denounce realities. **Naturalism**, which stemmed from realism, shows frames of life thorough predominately a “scientific” observation of the vices of the lower class.

Here are some examples of
more modern popular works
that I suggest you read
(partial international
selection):

Tennessee Williams
A Streetcar Named Desire

Henrik Ibsen
A Doll's House

George Bernard Shaw
Man and Superman

Samuel Beckett
Waiting for Godot

Oscar Wilde
*The Importance of Being
Earnest*

Jean-Paul Sartre
No Exit

Eugène Ionesco
The Rhinoceros

Federico García Lorca
Blood Wedding

Arthur Miller
Death of a Salesman

With the **avant-garde** movement and fin-de-siècle restructuring of Western thought, there is much more abstraction and expressionist thought (think of comparing it to how painting developed at the same time).

Historically, think about how Freud, Darwin, Einstein, Marx and Nietzsche tore down the pillars of traditional Western thought and left us blazing through the rubble of post-industrial urbanism. How would you react?

4.4.6. Avant-garde connections

Sigmund Freud – 1900

Charles Darwin – 1859

Albert Einstein – 1920

Karl Marx – 1867

Nietzsche - 1886

PSYCHOLOGICAL
experiments – T.S. Elliot

EXISTENTIAL thought –
Albert Camus, Samuel
Beckett

SOCIALIST literature –
John Steinbeck and
George Orwell

SOLIPSISM – César
Vallejo, Samuel Beckett

EXPERIMENTAL –
André Breton, David
Foster Wallace

SYMBOLIC thought –
Charles Baudelaire and
William Butler Yeats