UNIT 12: INTERPRETING DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- define a play
- explain the different types of drama
- state the constituent parts of a play
- discuss the theory of drama
- identify the various modes of theatrical presentations

12.2 INTRODUCTION

You must have surely heard the word 'play' in your lifetime. Here 'play' is not what you mean in the simple sense of the term i.e. taking part in game or sports. So, in its literary context its meaning is to act on a stage, to perform a role of a character. We can also say that a play is a dramatic composition that tells a story by means of dialogue and action to be performed on the stage. So in this unit, we will help you to understand the

concept of a play. Further, we shall discuss the constituent parts of a play as well as the theory of drama. Now let us move to the concept of the *play*.

12.3 WHAT IS A PLAY?

A play is a dramatic composition that tells a story by means of dialogue and action to be performed on the stage. It is thus a dramatic representation and its equivalent word is drama. In Greek language, drama also meant simply to act or perform. So, the good old name for drama is *play.*

Plays are fundamentally different from other literary forms. Stories and poems are written only for reading. But plays are designed for performance, not for reading alone. Words are written to be spoken by actors and heard by an audience. So it has both the aural and visual aspects. Actors are the vehicles as well as the instruments for the playwrights. The word 'Playwright' is etymologically to be noted. It falls in the same line as that of a 'shipwright', a 'cartwright', or a 'wheelwright', carrying the sense of a craft person, a maker of crafts. Similarly, a playwright is also a maker of a script for the stage- a text. But that does not mean that it will not carry literary elements or aesthetic complexity. Let us note that a play should contain a story, usually of human conflicts, and fully exists in production and should have its access to the theatre at the stage. This is crucial to the structure of the play.

You should note that a play is to be acted before an audience. We cannot conceive of a play without an audience. The author has both actors and audience in view when he is penning his lines. No doubt it is a story or fiction or fact told to an audience, but *it is in essence a story or fact interpreted before an audience by a body of actors.* A Play has thus a plot, characters, dialogue, an atmosphere, an outlook on life. Its full qualities are revealed in presentation on the stage before an audience.

Considering all these aspects and features for distinguishing Drama as an art-form from other arts, Allardyce Nicoll in his book *Theory of Drama* has framed its rough definition in this way:

"Drama is the art of expressing ideas about life in such a manner as to render that expression capable of interpretation by actors and likely to interest an audience assembled to hear the words and witness the action."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is a play?

Q2. What is the good old name of drama?

12.3.1 Types of Drama

Let us now delve into the different kinds of play. From the earliest times, drama has been broadly divided into two kinds, namely, Tragedy and Comedy. The tragedy and the comedy of the ancient Greeks are still accepted as the prime and model achievements in this form of art.

Tragedy is a sad or unlucky event in human life in the ordinary sense of the term. In drama it deals with the tragic and dark side of life, aiming at inspiring the people with a sense of pity and awe. Characters are faced with tragic situations and finally there is catastrophe and an unhappy fate.

Generally speaking, tragedies are classified in two forms- Classical and Romantic- the former is based on Greek conventions, the latter on its own standards.

The word 'comic' or comedy, as you know, is ordinarily used for something which is funny or laughable and deals with the lighter side of life. It has a pleasant atmosphere and is entertaining. In some cases, you can see that there are some tragic situations, but ultimately, there is happy ending. Some are again, satirical. Satire and Comedy are closely related.

Like tragedies, comedies are also of several types. There are some 'romantic comedies' as recognised by the critics, like Shakespeare's romantic comedies. There are also comedy of 'humours', comedy of 'manners', sentimental comedies, black or dark comedies, etc. Apart from these, there are tragi-comedies, containing comic relief and at the same time possessing some potentially tragic background.

12.4 THE THEORY OF DRAMA

As you have come to know that since drama is an art, so like all arts it must have its conventions, principles and some theories. A play must deliver the whole message within a very few hours. A playwright has to exercise great economy in the handling of the plot, in the delineation of character, in use of choicest words rejecting all superfluous and unnecessary details. Only those essential materials are required which lead to the growth of dramatic characters and situations and which are conducive to the intended dramatic effect. So you can see that from the point of view of structure, a play must have some divisions as shown below.

(i) An Exposition:

This forms the introduction, explaining the circumstances or situation from which the action is to start. The exposition gives the audience an idea of when and where the action is about to take place, who are the characters involved, what is their relation with each other and what has taken place before the curtain goes up.

(ii) The Complication or Rising action:

After the exposition is developed, the play gradually involves in complication or in progress of the story which must be resolved in the play itself. This is called the complication.

The complication creates suspense. The action then proceeds to the point of greatest emotional impact, which is called the climax.

(iii) Climax (or Crisis):

In the climax, it takes a turn for the better or worse (according to the kind of play- tragedy or comedy). It is called, then, the denoument.

(iv) Denoument (or Falling Action):

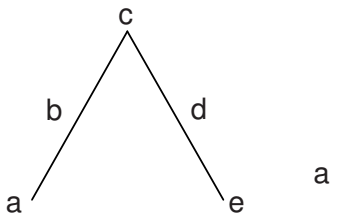
The falling action unravels the solutions to the problems raised and helps the movement towards the resolution of the conflicts presented in the play, which is called Resolution.

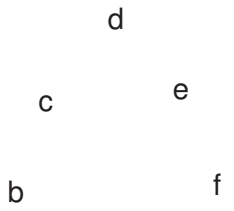
(v) Solution or Catastrophe:

Here the problem of the play is solved, outcome of the situation is made clear, and the fate of the characters is decided. In case of comedy it is ***solution*** and in the tragedy it is ***catastrophe.***

These constitutional parts in the composition of a play is proportionately structured according to the length of the drama. In a five-act play the ***Exposition*** occupies the first act or so; the ***Complication*** the next two acts or so; the ***Climax*** is a part of the third act; the ***Denoument*** and resolution is in the rest of the third act, the fourth act and a part of the fifth; the **Solution** or **Catastrophe** is in the rest of the fifth act. In shorter plays it is reduced accordingly. In **one-act plays** these parts are further reduced. The first three or four speeches form the exposition after which it moves into conflict or complication. The action proceeds to the climax and then quickly goes to denoument and then to the final solution.

The five-fold divisions are almost universally accepted and can be shown in a diagram in the following way:





A. a = Introduction or Exposition
b = Complication or Rising action
c = Climax, crisis or turning point
d = Denoument or Falling action or Return
e = Catastrophe or Solution

B. a = Exposition
b= Initial incident
c = Growth of action to its crisis
d = Crisis or turning point
e = Resolution
f = Catastrophe

Here in the diagram B we have seen that there are six divisions. Diagram A is a pyramidal structure for five-fold divisions, as symbolised by Gustav Freytag (1816-1875), a renowned German critic and dramatist. But W. Hudson in his book, *An Introduction to the Study of Literature* provided another minor division after introduction or exposition. To him, there are certain conditions or certain relations of character which are to be explained to the audience for better intelligibility and this distinguishes the introduction of the dramatic plot. This is called the *Initial incident*.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. What is the function of an exposition in a play?

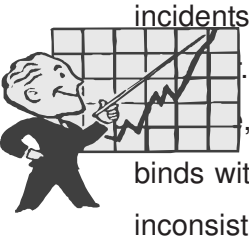
Q4. What is 'initial incident'?

12.5 THE COMPONENT PARTS OF A PLAY

Let us now look at the most important aspect of drama i.e. the component parts of a play.

A play has a plot, character, dialogue (or language), an atmosphere, thought and song. Aristotle long back in his book *Poetics* mentioned about six main parts in a play– **Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle** and ***Song.*** Of course, he referred to these elements in case of a tragedy only, though in general these are applicable in all types of play.

The Plot : The plot is the most important and unavoidable element on which the narrative or the play is constructed. It is the frame-work of the incidents or chain of events in a story, simple or complex, which are knit . When the incidents or episodes of life are linked through some , this becomes a plot. To achieve a certain objective, the playwright binds with a principle, these events of human life. In life there is variety, inconsistencies and disorders. The ancient Greek dramatists connected these formless varieties or inconsistencies with the theory of fate or destiny and linked them with a chain of order and unity. This application of form to human life is then, the plot.



In India, Bharata's *Natya Sastra* also gave much importance to the plot. It is mentioned in the book as 'Itibritta', which is the body of the drama *(Itibrittam tu natyashya sariram parikirtitam).* The latter rhetoricians called it the matter *(Vastu).*

Character : If some actions or incidents and the ideas they contain are to be made lively and breathing before us through dramatic situation, then some free human personality is needed. In other words, it needs something that will function as its motor characters. So character is the important element of a play. To some critics, characters constitute the soul of a play because they are the agents that enact the story of the plot.

Aristotle described four characteristics for a character. First and foremost is (i) *goodness*. The good characters will be good, but even the bad characters should posses some goodness. Secondly, character should be appropriate, (ii) *appropriateness or propriety*. The hero or the king must be courageous, he should not be otherwise. Women are supposed to be soft and sweet. Slaves are meant be loyal and respectful. If these traits are available accordingly in them, then they are appropriate. Otherwise they will lose propriety. Thirdly, characters must be true to life (iii) *likeness*. They must not be created on unreal elements. This is, however, not the same as making characters good or appropriate as said by Aristotle. The fourth point is (iv) *consistency*. If the subject of imitation is inconsistent, then even consistency of inconsistency must be maintained. Aristotle observed in this way.

Again the characters must be presented as necessary and as probable. Though in modern dramas, today, these rigidities or rules are not strictly adhered to, theoretically and primarily these points were taken as fundamental in those days.

Dialogue (Diction) : In a sense dialogue is the soul of the play. Dialogues given to the characters give movement to the play and allow it to advance. Whether the dialogues thrown by the characters mutually in different situations are natural, relevant or shortened or not, whether these are pertinent or favourable to arouse dramatic curiousity or not, all these should be considered in the framing of dialogues.

There has been a lot of discussion regarding dialogues. Aristotle has included in it diction, which refers to the spoken rhythm of the language in general. Through words, the meaning or purpose becomes expressive. The style will be dependent on the kinds of dramatic themes and according to the types of characters. Grand style is not applicable in all cases. He has also analysed the parts of speech, and other grammatical details–the words and modes of speech including metaphor. He has shown how poetry combines elevation of language with perspicuity. Similarly, Bharata in the *Natya Sastra* has also directed as to what type of language and in what style should be spoken by certain type of characters. That this should be

separate and distinct from our daily use has been emphasized by both the rhetoricians.

But in accordance with the changes of time, reasoning and ideas in subsequent ages, the language of the dialogue is also undergoing changes– from poetry to prose, prose to poetry and then again, to prose in modern times. Thus language has been the distinguishing feature in today's theatre.

A critic has justly said that "in most effective plays, the dialogue is not only suited to the speaker, but carries along the conflict more than any physical action on the stage." Even in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet himself told his players how the dialogue should be suitable to the action.

"Suit the action to the word, the word to the action. With this special observance, that you overstep not the modesty of nature'.... 'The end of the play is to hold the mirror upto nature". [Act. III. Sc II]

Thus, dialogue must have an indispensable link with the plot, character and action.

You must have note here that Aristotle has not discussed so much about 'thought' in the *Poetics.* According to him thought is very much internally linked with character and dialogue. The matter is included in 'rhetoric'. When a character in a play discusses an aspect of a matter, when a character likes to prove or disprove some action through reasoning or by creating sensations of pity, fear or anger– all these are revealed by 'thought' through dialogue. If something is to be exaggerated or to be ignored or demeaned, the character expresses thought and purpose. When the character is in the midst of perplexities for taking a final decision, the decision is reflected through the action and thought of the character. Aristotle laid down similar precepts, while discussing the element of thought in the composition of tragedy.

Spectacle : The next element of a play is spectacle. Aristotle wrote that s*pectacular equipment will be a part of tragedy.* He actually referred to spectacle as the stage-appearance of the actors. Since the play is visible and spectacular, so it is very important as to how actors through their dress, costume and make-up create the scenes. Through their make-up, gestures and postures and movements they can very easily create the desired effects

in the minds of the audience even without their dialogues. Aristotle perhaps meant this when he mentioned about 'Spectacle'.

In ancient Greece and in India too, scenes were not available in the stages. Scenaries were also absent. So actors had the great responsibility to express the dramatic situational descriptions through their costume, dress, make-up and movements. The audience visualised these features and reacted accordingly.

Even during Shakespeare's time in England in the sixteenth century, the Elizabethan stage was a bare one without props, curtains or wings. Visual imagination was necessary for the spectators to realise, and our actors provided that by their spectacles and acting. Shakespeare wrote *:*

'And so our scene must to the battle fly' (*Henry V.* Prologue to Act V). Also, Shakespeare normally used beautiful and effective image laden language in the form of the dialogue for describing scenes of mountains, rivers or such other dramatic situations, whenever necessary. Sun-rise, nightfall, noon, etc. were beautifully described through language; whereas in modern dramas, nowadays, light effects and technical devices would have been applied to produce these required spectacles.

Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rocky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
While night's black agents to their preys do rouse. [*Macbeth,* III. II]

The modern dramatists again, usually give instructions for producing detailed scenery and stage directions, which can be presented in today's developed stages.

When there were actions in the play so violent or distressing that they could not be represented on the stage, characters i.e. actors through their movements and gestures and acting tried to depict all the appropriate signs of horror and revulsion.

The Indian drama-rhetoricians were also conscious about the spectacular parts of dramatic representations. So they talked of and discussed the various types of acting-methods by the actors. They talked of four kinds of acting which were defined and explained in detail.

To-day, however, in the context of availability of developed stage and technical amenities, spectacle has been an important element in the production of a drama.

Song : Music was the source of inspiration and basis for the birth of a play. Hence it was an important mark of a play. In ancient India acting was also accompanied with music and instrument. In Greek drama the role of chorus was very important and essential. Aristotle has said "of the remaining elements song holds the chief place among the embellishment." "The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors, it should be an integral part of the whole and share in the action." *(Poetics)*. Thus, song was to be found in the choric part of a tragedy.

But, gradually, as time elapsed, the chorus and music began to lose its importance. In different periods of dramatic history as in Elizabethan Age, the Restoration period and in later times, in the Western dramas music was not the essential element. Of course in the *Operas*, in Indian *Jatras* and in moving theatres in lyrical dance-dramas, song and music still hold the premier roles. For instance in the Epic theatres of Bertolt Brecht, the music has retained its decisive place. Again, in Indian Sanskrit dramas 'Sentiment's (*Rasas*) were the soul of the dramas and each sentiment had its appropriate music.

Thus the role of music cannot be undermined outright. Its relevance depends on the nature of the particular drama. In case of lyrical or poetic plays or in dramas which are mostly allegorical, symbolic or folk in nature, the dramatist utilises music in a creative manner. You must be aware of the fact that in India some dramas written by Rabindranath Tagore or Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, exist only on music.

Music is the medium of articulation of the human heart and drama is the imitation of human experience and situations presented in order to please and give enjoyment to human hearts; so the utility of music, as suitable to the type of dramas, will always be there.

We have thus discussed the essential elements of a play as referred to by critics. But Aristotle divided these six elements of a tragedy in two ways:–

The external, namely *spectacle*, *song* and *diction*; and three internal, namely *plot, character* and *thought.*

Today in writing a script for the stage, a writer does not grammatically think of these elements, but cannot also ignore them because they are still relevant.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. What, according to Aristotle, are the main parts of a play?

Q6. Who is the major exponent of Epic theatre?

12.6 MODES OF THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS

a) Realistic Dramas: Domestic and Social Problem Plays

The dramatic movement traversing a long path from the time of its birth to the present day has undergone changes in all matters concerning subject-matter, structure, design and technique so as to suit the contemporary tone and taste of the modern age. The playwrights wanted to reveal the social human situations, their predicaments against the complexities and problems in the society.

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), the renowned Norweigean dramatist, became the greatest force in bringing out the desired revival of the modern theatre. He not only brought about an epoch-making change in the subject-matter and in treatment, but also introduced new technique with detailed stage directions and cast aside the *Soliloquies* and the *Asides* substituting the subtle treatment of dialogue. His famous plays, *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghost* (1881), *An Enemy Of the People (1882), The Wild Duck (1884)* are some of the masterpieces dealing with domestic problems, women's emancipation, individuals' conscience against the background of social forces.

The English theatre developed in the manner of the prose-plays of Ibsen and the movement was advanced by English dramatists like George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), John Galsworthy (1867-1933) and many others.

b) Poetic Plays:

As a reaction to realistic prose-plays the movement of poetic drama came into existence in the early twenties of the twentieth century in the hands of some young dramatists like W.B. Yeats, James Flecker, etc. and finally in the hands of T.S. Eliot (1889-1965) who was its greatest champion. To these dramatists, poetry *is the natural and complete medium for drama, that prose-play is a kind of abstraction capable of giving you only a part of what the theatre can give, and the verse-play is capable of something much more intense and exciting. Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939) , *The Confidential Clerk* (1949) are some of Eliot's verse-plays that are most effective and successful. In the *Murder in the Cathedral* T.S. Eliot borrowed some classical methods like chorus, song and dance and placed them in the modern perspective. This proved highly effective.

c) Brechtian Plays:

In the latter part of the twentieth century social and political ideas began to inspire the creation of modern plays. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the German poet and dramatist motivated by Marxian philosophy struck a new note and began to influence the dramatic world by his plays which dealt with the presentation of socialistic subject-matter in a new and easy technique combined with *alienation* effect-which is now commonly known as Epic-theatre.

d) Theatre of the Absurd: Absurd Dramas

Somewhat in a parallel way, on the basis of some ideas nourished from the philosophies of Existentialism and Surrealism and from the theories of Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus etc., a kind of drama emerged which lack formal logic in subject-matter and is somewhat distanced from the conventional dramatic structure. This movement is known as the Theatre of the Absurd.

The playwrights mostly associated with the movement are Samuel Beckett (1906 - 1989), a French-Irish dramatist, Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, etc.

In viewing these plays we must forsake the theatre of regular, developed and coherent situation; we must forget characterisation in a logical

theme and forget natural settings that bear the realistic relationship of the drama; we must also forget the use of language as a tool of logical communication and the cause-and-effect relationship found in traditional dramas. There are a number of puzzling devices used for the acting. The playwrights try to accustom the audience to a new kind of relationship between theme and presentation. *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett, *The Chairs* (1952), *Rhinoceros* (1959), *The Bold Prime Donna*, by Eugene Ionesco are some of the most famous absurd dramas in this line in the twentieth century.

e) Third Theatre:

A kind of theatre movement in between the city theatre and the village theatre (folk theatre) arose in the latter part of the 20th century to create a link between the two. It is a kind of synthesis both in thematic and structural way. The term was, however, coined by Eugenio Barba to describe his own group. It was so called by analogy with the 'Third World'– deprived, neglected and short of resources. Similarly in production of those plays, expenses are kept low and plays are written accordingly to suit the technique. A Polish dramatist J. Grotowski had considerable influence in the creation of such plays and formation of a troupe. In India, Badal Sarkar was the first dramatist to espouse the cause of this theatre. Some of his well known plays are *Pagla Ghora , Abong Indrajit, Bhuma,* etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. Name the poetic plays of T. S. Eliot.

Q8. What is third theatre?



12.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have given you a brief note on what a play is and discussed its component parts. It must be noted that a play is a dramatic composition that tells a story by means of dialogue and action to be performed on the stage. As you have finished reading the unit, you must be able to categorise the different types of drama and articulate the theory of drama. A play has a

plot, character, dialogue (or language), an atmosphere, thought and song and we have dealt these component parts of a play in details here. By now you must be able to analyse the varied modes of theatrical presentations.



12.8 FURTHER READING

1. Allardyce Nicoll. (1931). *The Theory of Drama.* New York: G. G. Harrap.
2. Worth, Katharine. (1973). *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*. London: G. Bell and Sons.
3. Zarhy-Levo, Yael. (2008). *The Making of Theatrical Reputations: Studies from the Modern London Theatre.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Ans to Q1. A play is a dramatic composition that tells a story by means of dialogue and action to be performed on the stage.

Ans to Q2. Play.

Ans to Q3. The exposition gives the audience an idea of when and where the action is about to take place, who are the characters involved, what is their relation with each other and what has taken place before the curtain goes up.

Ans to Q4. Refer to Section 12.4

Ans to Q5. Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Song.

Ans to Q6. Bertolt Brecht.

Ans to Q7. *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Confidential Clerk* (1949).

Ans to Q8. A kind of theatre movement in between the city theatre and the village theatre (folk theatre) arose in the latter part of the 20th century to create a link between the two. It is a kind of synthesis both in thematic and structural way.



12.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Comment on the various component parts of a drama.

Q2. What is a play? Discuss the different types of drama with examples.

Q3. Write short notes on :

a) Realistic drama

b) Brechtian drama

c) Theatre of the absurd

Q4. Describe in details the Theory of Drama.

Q5. What is meant by the term realistic drama? Explain.

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