

Objectives

- to look carefully at the genre called drama
- to understand the major types of the form in English
- to survey the history of drama in English
- to understand the conventions of plays

What is drama?

Drama is a form, like poetry, with a lengthy and diverse history. It has arisen as a form of human expression in many cultural traditions, often with its roots in dance, music and poetry. The Greek dramatist, Aeschylus, is responsible for a play called *The Persians*, which dates from 427 BCE. The *Natya Shastra* is the work of Bharata, and it is a guide to the theatrical arts, written in Sanskrit around 200 BCE, or somewhat later. The Chinese drama *Top Scholar Zhang Xie* was written during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE). Many tribal rites and indigenous practices include music, recitation or chants and dance, which can surely be called forms of dramatic presentation.

What is meant by the term 'drama' for your study in this course?

Drama or plays almost always include:

- words in some form – prose or poetry
- action embodied in performance
- a receiver – an audience, a viewer, or sometimes a reader or listener.

In his study of the art of drama, *The Idea of a Theater*, Francis Fergusson talks about our “perennial need for a direct and significant imitation of human life and action which can be played as music is played” (Fergusson 1949).

Of course, many familiar with Aristotle’s *Poetics*, often regarded as the well-spring of western thinking about drama, describe tragedy as the “imitation of an action”, a description that can also be extended to most other forms of drama.

Fergusson’s reference to “played” is a useful one, as besides referring to the repetition of the same or a similar imitation, it reminds us of a fairly essential difference between drama and other genres. Although poetry is often best understood and appreciated as a spoken form, and works in other genres can be ‘transformed’ into performance, drama is essentially meant to be performed. Therefore, although you may be reading plays in your IB literature course, studying them with performance always in mind is the most desirable strategy.

While you may be holding the ‘play’ in your hands, it is essential to remember that it is, in a way, an incomplete work of art until it is performed. You will need to make some imaginative leaps and conjectures about the

script if you are to gain a reliable sense of the play, especially if you have little or no access to the performance of plays where you go to school.

Some activities

Your teachers will be conscious of the need to keep the performance of plays in mind, and they will have collected a variety of activities that encourage this. You may be able to attend some productions of plays done by professional actors or presented by theatre groups within your school.

You are likely to have access to films and videos. Some of the plays we will be including later in this chapter can be found as short clips on YouTube. Also, within your class you will have the opportunity to read, perform or film your own ways of moving beyond the script. The more ways you find to embody the ideas, the feelings and the words of the play, the better sense you will have of it as theatre and the better you will be able to write about it.

The more you 'play' with plays, working out the immense possibilities for "direct and significant imitation of human life" the better 'knower' you will be of this form of art.

Activity

The way a dramatist opens a play is extremely important. They are inviting you into the ideas and actions, and there are many techniques for providing the **exposition** – of situating you in the world of the play.

Older plays often provide formal and separate speeches for the audience, both at the beginning of the play (**prologues**) or at the end (**epilogues**). In many ways, these speeches are in a form similar to the performance of a long poem, as they have a single speaker, but they are very closely tied to the ensuing theatrical expansion beyond just one actor.

Newer plays have their own methods of providing the audience an entrance into the world on stage.

Read the two play openings that follow below and on pages 152–6. In groups of three, discuss the openings and take turns to perform each of them individually.

- a The first comes from a play by Peter Shaffer, *Equus*, which tells the story of a psychiatrist attempting to help a young man, Alan, through a traumatic period of his life, when he has blinded six horses with an iron spike. Shaffer chooses to open the play with a reflection by Dysart, the psychiatrist.

Equus

Act I

Darkness.

Silence.

Dim light up on the square. In a spotlight stands ALAN STRANG, a lean boy of seventeen, in sweater and jeans. In front of him, the horse NUGGET. ALAN's pose represents a contour of

The tension between a returning Ghanaian and the African-American woman who accompanies him provides some interesting comparison to the tensions set up in the opening of *Equus*. Look again at both of these openings and think about:

- their similarities and differences
- the way context is conveyed
- the likely effect on audiences in terms of involving them in the play... or not.

Kinds of drama/plays

In studying drama in the IB literature course in English, there are three main types of plays you are likely to encounter as part of your syllabus. They are:

- tragedy
- comedy
- tragicomedy.

Plays classified as “theatre of the absurd”, melodrama, farce and epic theatre are also likely to be included, though some of these are often likely to appear in your works in translation.

A short review of these three main types is in order, especially for plays originally written in English. In class, you will explore these descriptions in more detail in relation to particular plays, but it is important to remember that the individual work will never be a perfect representation of a definition of the form. In your reading, definitions of the form can provide a frame within which you will consider and explore the individual play, but no work of art is usefully reduced to its class or definition. With a play, in its dual nature as both words on a page and its performance, there are even more variables to take into account in your reflections and writing.

Tragedy

Tragedy is best understood as a term in relation to the time in which a particular play was written. Much theory and terminology about tragedy can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, a document that is variably understood and applied today and best used with great care. There is a considerable difference between the contexts (values, the structure of society, the political structure and the actual geographical places) that produce Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, often identified as examples of classical tragedy and modern tragedy.

However, it is quite legitimate to make some assertions about what we mean when we call a play a ‘tragedy’. The description that you may have learned in your earlier years is not entirely inappropriate: A tragedy is a play with an unhappy ending. Often, the **protagonist**, or leading character in a tragedy, faces both a kind of defeat and a kind of enlightenment or transcendence: a surpassing of weaknesses to arrive at understanding, often of limitations.

Early in the play, the protagonist faces a tragic dilemma, where they have a choice in which neither of the outcomes is ‘good’. Still, the situation demands a choice with its attendant consequences.



Comedy / Tragedy

We see the consequences of such dilemmas towards the end of *Equus*. After Alan has been through a kind of 'cure', Dysart, the psychiatrist, who has struggled deeply with his own profession, speaks to Hesther, the person who has encouraged him to treat Alan:

Equus

Act 2, Scene 35

All right! I'll take it away! He'll be delivered from madness. What then? He'll feel himself acceptable! What then? Do you think feelings like that can simply be re-attached, like plasters? Stuck on other objects we select? Look at him... My desire might be to make this boy an ardent husband – a caring citizen – a worshipper of abstract and unifying God. My achievement, however, is more likely to make him a ghost!... Let me tell you exactly what I'm going to do to him!

[He steps out of the square and walks round the upstage end of it, storming at the audience.]

*I'll heal the rash on his body. I'll erase the welts cut into his mind by flying manes. When that's done, I'll set him on a nice mini-scooter and send him pattering off into the Normal world where animals are treated *properly*: made extinct or put into servitude, or tethered all their lives in dim light, just to feed it!*

Peter Shaffer

An equally powerful moment occurs in the Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock's play, about the travel of the famous Native American figure Sitting Bull and his son into Canadian territory after the Montana massacre at Little Big Horn. Superintendent Walsh, of the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police, believes in the integrity of his government and has forged a relationship with Sitting Bull, but finally finds he must betray the trust he has built between himself and Sitting Bull and rejects the Sioux leader's plea.

Walsh

SITTING BULL: White Sioux...

WALSH: *without turning* Yes.

SITTING BULL: I wish to speak with you.

WALSH *turns and looks at him.*

WALSH: I'm listening.

SITTING BULL: Have you had news from the Great White Mother?

WALSH: My news is always the same... No reservations, no food, no clothing, no supplies.

SITTING BULL: I wish you to send the Great White Mother a special message from Sitting Bull.

WALSH: What is it?



SITTING BULL: Tell her... once I was strong and brave. My people had hearts of iron... But now, my women are sick, my children are freezing and I have thrown my war paint to the wind. The suffering of my people has made my heart weak and I have placed nothing in the way of those who wish to return ~~across the~~ line. Many have done so. We who remain desire a home. For three years, we have been in the White Mother's land. We have obeyed her laws and we have kept her peace... I beg the White Mother to... to...

WALSH: Go on.

SITTING BULL: ...to have... pity... on us.

WALSH: Right!... Well then... I'll see that this goes off...

SITTING BULL *makes no move to leave.*

Is there anything else?

SITTING BULL: *gazing at Walsh* White Sioux...

WALSH: Yes?

SITTING BULL: *speaking slowly and with effort* ...I find it necessary... to make a request...

WALSH *stares at him.*

...a request... for... provisions for my people. We have nothing.

WALSH: *brusquely* Your provisions wait for you across the line. If you want provisions, go there for them.

SITTING BULL: We hear you have a quantity of flour and I have come to ask you for it.

WALSH: If you wish to do business, you do it at the trading post.

SITTING BULL *takes off his ragged blanket. He holds out the blanket to WALSH.*
WALSH *begins to breathe heavily as he struggles to retain control of himself.*

I have appealed to the Great White Mother and the Great White Mother says no.

SITTING BULL: I ask for only a little.

WALSH: *exploding* And I can give you nothing! God knows, I've done my damndest and nothing's changed. Do you hear that? Nothing's changed! Cross the line if you're so hungry, but don't, for Christ's sake, come begging food from me!

Sharon Pollock

Tragedy is almost always complex and challenging for the audience and painful both for the audience and for the characters in the play. Walsh, who has tried his best to be fair to Sitting Bull, is ultimately 'bested' by his own government.

Comedy

Comedy, on the other hand, is even more difficult to define, and no one has really done so convincingly. We almost wish Aristotle had written another complete treatise discussing comedy.

We certainly know what makes us laugh when we laugh, but the great range of causes for this response appears more difficult to sort out than the causes for our responses to tragedy.

Writers and critics have given various labels to what is 'comic', but no clear lines or distinctions have emerged in the same way that discussions and definitions associated with tragedy have led to some common notions.

Labels such as 'romantic' versus 'scornful' comedy, or 'laughing' as opposed to 'smiling' comedy are caught in a web of connotations. Again, we often embark on a long journey to sort out the variations in intention and effect only to arrive at the more simple conclusion that a comedy has a 'happy ending', which is not the case with most if not all tragedies. Also, comedy often aims – when it has a rhetorical agenda – to correct or re-direct human manners and habits.

A play many students know, and one which is often used in the IB literature syllabus to represent comedy, is Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Pretensions, deception, contradictory words and behaviours are all treated in a way we regard as amusing or satirical in this play.

Activity

Tom Stoppard has produced an interesting version of a play *Indian Ink*, in which two time frames are intermingled against a background in India. The major character, Flora Crewe, arrives in a small Indian town in the 1930s and then Stoppard advances the play 50 years when an American academic tries to unravel the 'real' story of a nude painting of Flora.

In the scene below, Das (the Indian who may have painted the picture) and Flora are engaged in both words and actions that depend on various elements of comedy to produce a fast-moving and entertaining scene.

Identify several humorous elements and explain why such elements contribute to comedy in this scene.

Indian Ink

DAS: You still have said nothing about the painting.

FLORA: I know.

DAS: I cannot continue today.

FLORA: I understand. Will we try again tomorrow?

DAS: Tomorrow is Sunday.

FLORA: The next day.

DAS: Perhaps I cannot continue at all.

FLORA: Oh. And all because I said nothing. Are you at the mercy of every breeze that blows? Are you an artist at all?

DAS: Perhaps not! A mere sketcher – a hack painter who should be working in the bazaar!

(He snatches up the 'pencil sketch' from under FLORA's hand.)

FLORA: *(Realizing his intention)* Stop it!

(DAS tears the paper in half.)

DAS: Or in chalks on the ghat!

FLORA: Stop!

(But DAS tears the paper again, and again and again, until it is in small pieces.)

I'm ashamed of you!

DAS: Excuse me, please! I wish to leave. I will take the canvas –

FLORA: You will not!

(It becomes a physical tussle. A struggle. She begins to gasp.)

DAS: You need not see it again!

FLORA: You will not take anything! We will continue!

DAS: I do not want to continue, Miss Crewe. Please let go!

FLORA: I *won't* let you give up!

DAS: Let go, damn you, someone will see us.

FLORA: – and stop crying! You're not a baby!

DAS: *(Fighting her)* I will cry if I wish!

FLORA: Cry, then, but you will finish what you started! How else will you ever ...
Oh!

(And suddenly FLORA is helpless, gasping for breath.)

DAS: Oh... oh, Miss Crewe – oh my God – let me help you. I'm sorry. Please. Here, sit down –

(She has an attack of breathlessness. He helps her to a chair. FLORA speaks with difficulty.)

FLORA: Really, I'm all right.

(Pause. She takes careful breaths.) There.

DAS: What happened?

FLORA: I'm not allowed to wrestle with people. It's a considerable nuisance. My lungs are bad, you see.

DAS: Let me move the cushion.

FLORA: It's all right. I'm back now. Panic over. I'm here for my health, you see. Well, not *here*... I'll stay longer in the Hills.

DAS: Yes, that will be better. You must go high.

FLORA: Yes. In a day or two.

DAS: What is the matter with you?

FLORA: Oh, sloshing about inside. Can't breathe under water. I'm sorry if I frightened you.

DAS: You did frighten me.

FLORA: I'm soaking.

DAS: You must change your clothes.

FLORA: Yes. I'll go in now. I've got a shiver. Pull me up. Thank you. Ugh. I need to be rubbed down like a horse.

DAS: Perhaps some tea... I'll go to the kitchen and tell –

FLORA: Yes. Would you? I'll have a shower and get into my Wendy house.

DAS: Your...?

FLORA: My big towel is on the kitchen verandah – would you ask Nazrul to put it in the bedroom?

(DAS runs towards the kitchen verandah, shouting for Nazrul. FLORA goes into the interior, into the bathroom, undressing as she goes, dropping the blue dress on the floor, and enters the bathroom in her underwear.)

DAS returns, hurrying, with a white towel. He enters the interior cautiously, calling 'Miss Crewe...' He enters the bedroom and finds it empty. From the bathroom there is the sound of the water pipes thumping, but no sound of water.)

FLORA: *(Off stage)* Oh, damn, come on!

DAS: Miss Crewe...

(The thumping in the pipes continues. DAS approaches the bathroom door.)

DAS: *(Louder)* Miss Crewe! I'm sorry, there's no –

FLORA: *(Off stage, shouts)* There's no water!

(The thumping noise continues.)

DAS: Miss Crewe! I'm sorry, the electricity –

(The thumping noise suddenly stops.)

(In mid-shout) The electric pump –

FLORA: *(Entering naked)* I have to lie down.

DAS: Oh! *(Thrusting the towel at her)* Oh, I'm so sorry!

(Relieved of the towel, DAS is frozen with horror.)

FLORA: I'm sorry, Mr Das, but really I feel too peculiar to mind at the moment.

DAS: *(Turning to leave hurriedly)* Please forgive me!

FLORA: No, please, there's water in the jug on the wash-stand.

(She stands shivering, hugging the towel.)

Do be quick.

DAS: (*Getting the water*) It's the electricity for the pump.

FLORA: Is there any water?

DAS: Yes, it's full... Here –

(*She gives her the jug, and turns away.*)

FLORA: Thank you. No, you do it. Over my head, and my back, please.

(*DAS pours the water over her, carefully.*)

Oh heaven... Oh, thank you... I'm terribly sorry about this. Oh, that's good.
Tip the last bit on the towel.

DAS: There...

(*She wipes her face with the wet corner of the towel...*)

FLORA: I feel as weak as a kitten.

DAS: I'm afraid that's all.

FLORA: Thank you.

(*She wraps the towel around herself.*) Could you do the net for me?

(*DAS lifts one side of the mosquito net and FLORA climbs onto the bed.*)

I'll be all right now.

DAS: (*Misunderstanding; leaving*) Yes, of course.

Tom Stoppard

Tragicomedy

Much modern drama has combined elements of what we associate with both tragedy and comedy and given rise to what is now called 'tragicomedy', in an attempt to account for the serious and comic elements which are found there.

However, tragicomedy really has some much older counterparts and various other labels are given to the same plays; Renaissance plays also represent the dramatic impulse to represent both the tragic and the comic in the lives and fortunes of their characters. The inclusion by Shakespeare of comic scenes and characters provides what some call **comic relief**, but tragicomedy might be seen as a more integral blend of the tragic and the comic.

In the 18th century, Samuel Johnson, an important writer and critic of his time, praised tragicomedy and its effects on the audience. He wrote in *Rambler*: "...no plays have oftner filled the eyes with tears... than those variegated with interludes of mirth".

One useful approach to the nature of tragicomedy can be found in a study of this form by Verna A. Foster, who includes the words of Doctor Johnson just cited. This writer offers a helpful distinction of the way tragicomedy works in the two different periods.

In Renaissance tragicomedies, Foster says, "the protagonists are usually potentially tragic figures in an ultimately comic universe". Foster would

consider Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* an example of this combination.

However, "in modern tragicomedy, the individual is more often a comic figure in a universe probably tragic or at best uncertain" (Foster 2004). Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are characters most of us would see as fitting this second context.

While this set of distinctions may be a little reductive, it is a useful guide to the label, 'tragicomedy'. If you are studying modern drama in Part 3 of your syllabus, you may find, along with Beckett, that such playwrights as Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Wole Soyinka and Caryl Churchill will ask you to think about 'tragicomedy' as an appropriate description of their plays.

Other 'labels' for plays

Both **melodrama** and **farce** are forms of drama that inevitably appear in surveys of the genre called 'drama'. Melodrama is certainly something with which we are all familiar in this era, where TV has had such a great influence, and farce, too, has its place in weekly programming.

Melodrama

TV soap operas are perhaps the form of melodrama that you are most likely to encounter in contemporary experience. The melodrama tends to oversimplify serious matters, to heighten black and white contrasts. Characterization leans towards stereotyping. While we may be amused, fascinated or engaged in this form of melodrama, we may not be deeply moved. While there may be moments in plays that you read in your IB study that strike you as a little 'melodramatic', you may not actually find melodrama included in your set of plays. Plays such as Shaffer's *Sleuth* may be considered melodrama.

Farce

Farce is another form we also recognize from TV and films. The intent here is perhaps clearer than in other forms; Lawrence Perrine and others describe the effect desired from the audience of farce as "explosive laughter" (Perrine 1978). Whether from current favourites in the form of film such as *The Pink Panther* or *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, or in the situation comedies of TV, farce is characterized by physical comedy, ludicrous action, word gags, and absurd events and outcomes. While a whole play you study may not be categorized as 'farce', farcical elements appear throughout the history of drama.

Modern plays by Joe Orton and some plays by John Guare are often categorized as farce; Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* is a frequently performed contemporary example of farce.

Beyond these categories, you will find other types of drama such as epic theatre, comedy of manners, the theatre of the absurd, the theatre of cruelty, and feminist theatres. While there is not space to explore these here, you will find that some plays in your study will be connected both to one of the major forms discussed previously, as well as to more particular drama categories.

A brief history of drama written in English

Like the other short histories of genres included in this book, it would be impossible to pretend to cover the history of such complicated matters in a few pages. However, in order to introduce you to the subject, some aspects of this history, the material relevant to the development of drama in English has been divided into three large sections:

- Medieval or pre-Renaissance drama.
- Renaissance drama.
- Modern drama.

The latter two sections cover the time periods in which drama has especially flourished. The first section suggests some of the roots for the development of drama, which at that time was occurring in Great Britain.

Medieval drama (c.12th–15th century)

Because of the interest in the middle ages in recent years, you may have encountered some versions of medieval drama at fairs where there is an attempt to replicate this period in British culture. You can find short clips of the performance of medieval stage performance on the Internet.

There were really two essential phases in dramatic performance in these centuries. In the earlier phase, the Catholic Church used dramatic representation to assist a non-literate population in learning materials relevant to the faith. The enactment of the Catholic Mass has itself many dramatic elements and one in particular – a kind of antiphonal trope, a chanted dialogue – was often incorporated into the liturgy of the Eucharist. Eventually, stories from the Bible were incorporated into the liturgical events connected to this ceremony.

Townspeople themselves then began to develop the stories into more elaborate dramatic representations, forming guilds or managing groups with particular biblical stories connected to particular groups. Eventually the productions moved out of the church and on to what were called ‘pageant wagons’ – portable stages that could be moved from town to town for performance. The stories were often grouped into ‘cycles’. Soon, the public was able to view various versions of Bible stories in performances that were designed to both educate and entertain. Melodramatic versions of Herod and the massacre of the Holy Innocents or Noah quarrelling with his wife became popular features of these plays.

In addition to these biblical plays, often called the ‘mystery’ plays, were ‘morality’ plays with more explicitly didactic and serious aims, such as *Everyman*, and the less serious, often highly-comic work that was produced in the medieval university.

A significant role of the medieval theatre was to create an expectation and a practice of drama that was to lead to the exceptional vitality of play writing and performance from the 16th century to the middle of the 17th century in England, the period of such influential figures as Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and others.

Renaissance drama (15th–17th century)

One of the major developments in drama during this period was the actual construction of theatres, where people of all classes could attend much more developed plays which went far beyond the biblical subject matter of the medieval plays.

If you study Shakespeare in the IB literature course, you will become acquainted with many features of the theatre in this period: the actual design of theatres like the Globe; the importance of words far beyond the role of staging and costume and other theatrical effects; and the absence of women from any acting roles.

Drama in this period became a major force in the development of the English language and the poetry of the stage. Shakespeare's overriding achievement in drama spurred inspiration, competition and imitation. The development of acting companies meant an expansion of plays available to the public. The interest and patronage of Queen Elizabeth and her court were a further element of the vigorous development of drama during this period.

Perhaps one of the most revealing examples of what the theatre and acting meant to its most well-known practitioner, William Shakespeare, can be found in his play *Hamlet*.

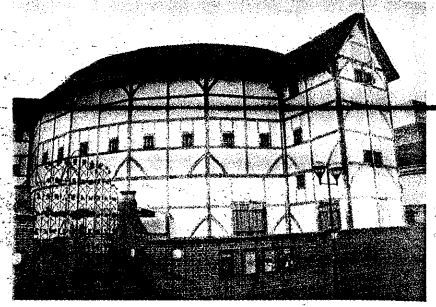
In this play, Prince Hamlet is given the role of the revenger of his father's murderer, who happens to be the current king, his uncle Claudius. Shakespeare not only introduces a play-within-a-play to help Hamlet out in the discovery of King Claudius's guilt, but also includes lines which tell us something now about the place of actors both in Shakespeare's estimation and for the period of Renaissance drama. Hamlet lets the audience know that his plan is hatched: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (Act 2, Scene 2, lines 614–5).

Hamlet is inspired by the arrival of a group of travelling players to come up with a further step in his plan to revenge his father's death, but this presence also gives Shakespeare the opportunity to celebrate acting itself. When Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, suggests he will look after the players according to what he thinks people of their class deserve, Hamlet scolds him, saying, "God's bodkin, man, much better!" (Act 2, Scene 2, line 340). He speaks of them as the true recorders of the times in which the court is living: "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (Act 2, Scene 2, line 535).

Modern drama (19th–20th century)

Although the period between Renaissance drama and the advent of what is generally considered the 'modern' period in English drama contains some work in theatre that is both interesting and important – the works of William Congreve and William Wycherley, for example, who produced entertaining examples of the **comedy of manners** – the more likely emphasis in your IB syllabus will be modern plays, dating from the late 19th century into the 20th century.

As you study modern drama in English, you will find that other aspects of the development of drama will come into play. **Realism** and **naturalism** are two of these terms. Study of these terms can become quite extensive and you may well have encountered them in your study of novels.



Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London

Some rather simple definitions for these two terms can be a starting point, but as you look at particular plays your understanding of both labels will evolve. As noted earlier, it's always best to consider such labels as helpful to frame ideas, not as envelopes into which every related play must be tightly fitted.

Realism

Often defined as the attempt to show "life as it is really lived", realism presents problems both for the playwright and for the audience. "A willing suspension of disbelief", in the widest sense, is required in order for us to see on the stage or read in the script things that are not somehow selected, contrived and arranged in a way that life can never be. Still, moments, actions, conversations can certainly be presented in a play as replications of everyday human events and behaviour. Certainly, early practitioners of realistic drama were eager to move away from what they saw as the 'romanticism' of earlier works in the 19th century, often written on the continent of Europe. If we look at plays like Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* we can certainly sense a drive to present life as it 'is really lived' in a particular context. Arthur Miller and Sam Shepard do not draw back from such realism as you will see in studying their plays.

Naturalism

In some ways, naturalism in drama may be even more problematic. As a product of the thinking and practice of Emile Zola, the French novelist, the goal here is to look clinically at the effects of birth and background on human behaviour. Often the force of society on characters is material for exploration in naturalistic drama and often, too, both the context and the choices of the characters are tinged with pessimism.

However, it is often difficult to draw any clear lines between what is 'realistic' and what is 'naturalistic' in any drama. A whole range of approaches is possible, from the social satire of George Bernard Shaw in a play like *Arms and the Man* to the dark and violent version of Shakespeare's *King Lear* by Edward Bond.

Although there are exceptions, it can certainly be said that modern drama has been much affected by the trends mentioned above. Whether we are reading or seeing the plays of Tennessee Williams, Sarah Kane or Louis Nowra, we are likely to encounter more of the tragic side of life than the comic or the farcical. That is not to say that comedy has disappeared in modern drama, just that seriousness tempered sometimes by humour, farce, gentle or biting satire is likely to be the more prevalent focus of plays you will read from the 20th and 21st centuries.

'Audience' versus 'reader': which should we use?

In many cases where students are working with drama in Part 3 of their Language A literature syllabus, access to the theatre and professional performances of particular plays may not be possible. Hence, your experience of the play will be limited to reading scripts or watching film versions, or classroom readings and performances. Possibly, your school or your theatre students may be staging a production.

Reading, as we know, is one way in which people can come to know plays. A fuller experience will be derived from seeing that 'script' enacted

in performance. While you are studying plays in this IB literature course, both reading and seeing the plays in performance are regarded as legitimate experiences of the plays, but there will always be an expectation of close study of the text of the play, the script.

Which audience?

There are many complicated considerations in determining the effect on an audience. Who do we mean by 'the audience'? Playwrights produce their work in time and space. Historical and cultural context will affect the way the play is received.

For the purposes of your IB literature course, the only audience you really can know is a contemporary one, people of your own time, although research and your teacher's knowledge can give you some information about, say, the Shakespearean audience. Attending a performance of a play can give you a sense of your own reactions as well as those of people who are sharing that experience. Therefore, you need to exercise great care when you are writing about a play's effect on 'the audience'. This term may describe both a reader (you), a group of readers, or it may describe a theatre audience.

What is important is that you always keep in mind the likely or possible effects of the words, the movements and gestures either included by the playwright or implied, and the limitations and possibilities of different types of theatres. This consciousness is not always easy to maintain. Even with the help of films or videos, your experience of a play is not quite that of the theatre. If your experience is entirely limited to reading the plays, you will have to practise a larger sense of the work than if you were reading a novel.

So, how will you handle writing a Paper 2 essay about plays you have studied? While references to 'the reader' are in some cases acceptable, generally the IB examiner will expect you to both possess and communicate that you are well aware that you are discussing plays whose completion lies in performance. You can convey this awareness by referring to such matters as stage directions, to entrances and exits and to groupings of people on the stage; in fact, many of the conventions that follow in the next section of this chapter will provide you with ideas about addressing the plays as plays, and not just as texts.

The conventions of drama

Before we survey the conventions of the genre, it is important to note that what follows focuses chiefly on the conventions that have to do with the text of the play. There are many conventions that have more to do with acting than they do with the script of the play, such as blocking or pitch and tone. Sometimes the two sets of conventions are very close and overlap; some are very precisely connected to such matters as the words, the plot, characters and setting of the play, and are more likely to be found in the list that follows. Others have to do with techniques of performance and are generally not included in the list.

Conventions are also connected to particular historical periods; the conventions of Greek theatre are not precisely the same as those of Elizabethan or modern theatre. What follows does not attempt to be a comprehensive list of theatre or theatrical conventions; the terms found

here are those most likely to be included in Paper 2 questions, in which genre and its conventions play a part.

Conventions associated with the words written and spoken

Dialogue includes all the words from the play designed to be spoken by actors, comprising the bulk of the script. **Monologues**, on the other hand, are long speeches spoken by a single character. When a monologue is spoken by a player alone on the stage it is called a **soliloquy**.

Verbal irony is a frequent feature of plays. It usually involves saying one thing and intending or implying another or additional meaning. It is sometimes referred to as **double entendre**.

The **aside** (usually designated in the script) gives the actors an opportunity to add something 'under their breath', for the benefit of other characters and also, or especially for, the audience.

Conventions associated with character portrayal

The protagonist of a play is usually the chief character who faces up to the problem or dilemma that the play addresses. A rival to this protagonist is called the antagonist. An anti-hero is a protagonist whose character includes some features that are the opposite of what is expected of a hero or heroine in a play.

Just as in novels, for example, there are likely to be secondary or minor characters in most plays. These characters have roles of varying importance. Sometimes they will be stereotypes, such as the fool, the villain, the confidante, and are often called **stock characters**. An **eponymous** character is one who gives the name to the play, as in *Hamlet*, for example.

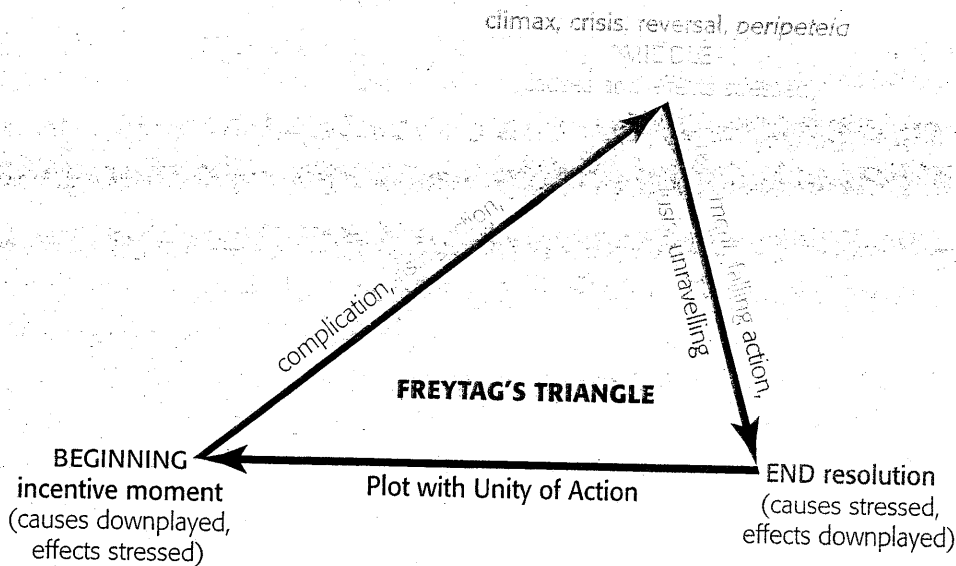
Most of what needs to be known about characters will be revealed in the course of the play; sometimes, however, the material is called their back story. At times, these stories will be delivered by actually performing incidents from the past in **flashbacks**. Events that occur in the future are called **flash forwards**. Synonyms for these two terms are **analepsis** and **prolepsis**, respectively.

Playwrights often help to build impressions of characters by deliberately constructed entrances and exits. Delaying the entrance of a main character can help to build suspense; abrupt exits can convey a certain temperamental aspect of a character. Gestures and repetitive actions are also used to delineate characters and create expectations about them.

Finally, the substitution of actions and gestures for words through mime or pantomime is a technique quite opposite to the importance of words: the absence of words to convey meaning.

Conventions associated with the action or plot of the play

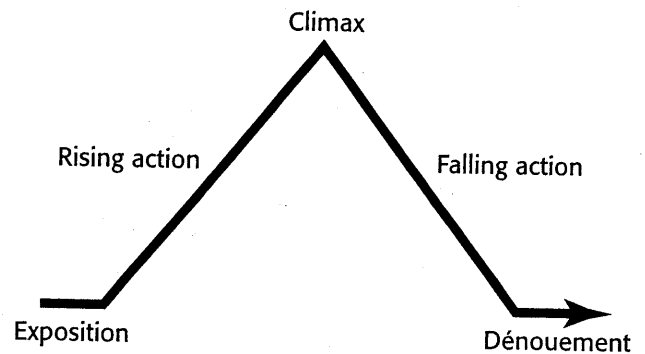
Freytag's triangle or pyramid is one of the commonly-used ways to map the action of plays. This approach was devised by the German playwright Gustav Freytag in the 19th century. It offers a way of understanding the structure of many plays, but it should be used as a general frame, not a representation of the exact structure of all plays. Perhaps it best serves as a useful measure of congruence and deviation. At the top of page 170 is a version by Barbara McManus. It is helpful to use the terminology of this triangle to refer to certain parts of a play.



Freytag's triangle

The **exposition** of the play usually occurs in the first scenes or pages of the script, and answers at least some of the following questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why?

The **rising action** introduces most of the essential material and shows how the characters are involved in the action, the conflict or the issue on which the play focuses. It usually arises from some impulse introduced early in the play and is sometimes called the **exciting force** which sets off the **complication**.



Most students are familiar with the high point of action in novels and films, called the **climax**, and this feature will likely be found somewhere along the line of action, sometimes in the middle, but sometimes unexpectedly early or late. Often, it is the point of greatest interest and sometimes of emotional response on the part of the audience.

Certain things in the action of the play are often seriously altered by the climax of the play and give rise to the **falling action**, which, in turn, leads on to what is invariably called the **dénouement** (the 'unknotting' of the threads of the plot) or the **resolution**. There are in fact so many ways in which plays can conclude that it is important to remain flexible when applying labels.

The action of the play may fall into such divisions as acts (often a larger unit) and scenes (either subdivisions of acts or units of their own). Acts and scenes (whether explicitly identified or not) are carefully decided by the playwright to deliver the action with an appropriate conceptual and emotional rhythm. Even intermissions designated by the playwright can affect the way the audience reacts to the play.

A **prologue** or an **epilogue** (often a speech by one voice) occurring respectively before the play begins or after it ends, can also be used in various ways to deliver information or reflections. **Curtain lines**, lines

delivered at the end of an act or a scene; may also be used quite effectively by playwrights.

Other elements related to the unfolding of the action of the play, but not necessarily related to each other, are as follows:

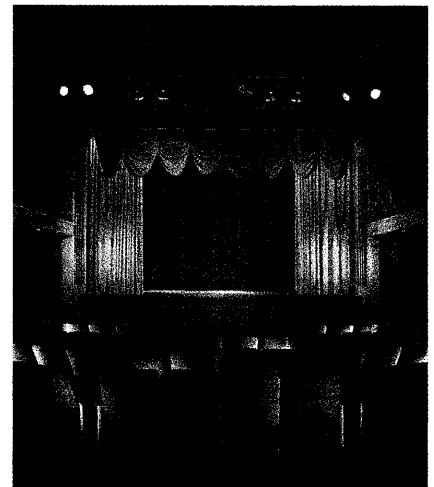
- **Dramatic irony**, which adds another layer to the experience of the reader or audience. In this feature, the audience is provided with information that characters on the stage do not possess. The character may act in a way that only the audience knows to be disastrous, for example. Dramatic irony is also used to refer to outcomes that are the reversal of expectation. This feature can easily cross over into the territory of verbal irony, where the character's words carry a meaning unknown to the character but not to the audience.
- **Comic relief** is sometimes included in plays that are primarily serious or tragic. Words, actions or characters may be introduced to provide a lightening of the mood or circumstances, as the Fool does in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.
- **Deus ex machina**, a Latin term stemming from classical drama, is sometimes a useful one for explaining the introduction of an unexpected or improbable event (or person) that leads to a solution of some dramatic problem. The gods in Greek drama were sometimes lowered on to the stage to solve a tricky situation; hence the term 'god from a machine'.

Some conventions related to staging and performance

The performance of the play must take place in some physical setting. The **set** of the play is the arrangement of the stage to represent the setting of the action. It can include a backdrop as well as theatrical properties or props, which include furnishings and objects needed by the actors. **Lighting** and **sound** are often important atmospheric elements of plays. Music, of course, may play a major role here as well.

Stage business is another convention of theatre that is sometimes relevant to discussing plays; it refers to actions that are incidental to the immediate action, such as an actor playing with some article of clothing or the use of other props. Such actions can be used to develop a character or suggest some concern that is an alternative to the focus of the moment.

Two other features that may also be used to good effect and be most vivid in performance are the **freeze frame** and the **breaking of the fourth wall**. In the first feature, the action is stopped, the actors freeze and meaning is conveyed through this moment of silence and stasis. The second feature refers to the imaginary 'fourth wall' that is characteristic of the conventional proscenium stage, which often includes a curtain. The curtain functions as a 'fourth wall' which, when opened, allows the audience to view the set and the actors; in the absence of a curtain, there is still an imagined 'fourth wall' between the stage and the audience. While many modern productions of plays work well outside this conventional stage, the term continues to refer to actors acknowledging or speaking to the audience.



- 1 Choose a play that is part of your study of Part 3. In small groups, assemble a list of as many of the conventions listed earlier that you can find in that play and compose a chart which has the following three features:
 - a The name of the convention.
 - b A brief definition of the convention.
 - c The exact location of the convention in the play, using act and/or scene, if possible. (Your grasp of the convention will be strengthened if you use more than one example.)
- 2 Choose one of the charts developed by the class (your own or one from another group). Working alone, write a short paragraph on the effect of one convention on its immediate context and/or the whole play.

Conclusion

You will discover that there is a lot to know and a lot to apply if you are going to study and write well about drama in Part 3 of your syllabus.

You need to understand that the more you read and see plays, the more you will understand about the intentions and the experience playwrights aim to provide. Lest you become overwhelmed by the breadth of what you must know and the difficulties to overcome, especially if your opportunities to enjoy theatre in its fullest are limited, you may enjoy what Christopher Durang's 'Mrs. Sorken' has to offer you in her view of theatre. Be wary of taking her ideas as factual!

Below are sections of her monologue designed to 'enlighten' you.

Mrs. Sorken

Enter Mrs. Sorken to address the audience. She is a charming woman, well dressed and gracious, though a little scattered. She is happy to be there.

MRS. SORKEN: Dear theatregoers, welcome, and how lovely to see you. I've come here to talk to you about theatre, and why we all leave our homes to come see it, assuming we have. But you have left your homes, and you're here. So, welcome!

Now I have just written down some comments about theatre for you, if I can just find them. *(Searches through her purse.)*

Isn't it refreshing to see someone with a purse? *(Looks some more through the purse.)*

Well, I can't find my notes, so I'll have to make my comments from memory.

(From here on, she is genuinely winging it – some of it may be thoughts she's prepared, much of it are thoughts that pop into her head as she is speaking. She is not nervous, though. She loves talking to the audience.)