

A Short History of Drama

- (I) **Introduction to English drama (Theatre)** : Drama has its origins in folk theatre. We therefore cannot consider drama merely as a part of literature. Words are the medium of literature as an art but drama is a multiple art using words, scenic effects, music, gestures of the actors and the organising talents of a producer. The dramatist must have players, a stage and an audience.

The beginnings of drama in England are obscure. There is evidence to believe that when the Romans were in England they established vast amphitheatres for the production of plays but when the Romans departed their theatre departed with them. Then there were minstrels. People enjoyed their performances. Gradually by the 10th century the ritual of the plays that itself had something dramatic in it, got extended into the rudiments of a play. Between the 13th and the 14th century drama started having themes which were separated from religion. The words themselves were spoken in English, a longer dramatic script came into use, and they were called Miracle plays. Later, these religious dramas were the Morality plays in which characters were abstract vices and virtues. These were allegories.

- (II) **Elizabethan and Restoration drama (Theatre)** : These Secular Morality plays have direct links with Elizabethan plays. The Renaissance imposed a learned tradition, classical in depth with themes of education, general moral problems and secular politics. The plays had nothing to do with religion. There were examples of both, comedy and tragedy. Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare are the prime dramatists of this era. It was Kyd who discovered how easily blank verse might be converted into a useful theatrical medium which Shakespeare used brilliantly in all his plays. Tragedy developed in the hands of Kyd and Marlowe. Comedy had also proceeded beyond rustic humour. But by the nineties of the 16th century, the theatre in England was fully established but complicated conditions governed the activities of the dramatist.

The public theatre of the 16th century differed in many important ways from the modern theatre. It was open to sky, without artificial lighting, the stage was a raised platform with the recess at the back supported by pillars. There was no curtain and the main platform could be surrounded on three sides by the audience. Around the theatre there were galleries. In the 17th century the enclosed theatre gained importance. There was increasing attention to scenic device as theatre became private.

Shakespearean era came into existence in the 16th century to the public theatre. He wrote for the contemporary theatre, manipulating the Elizabethan stage with great resource and invention. But the genius of Shakespeare should not allow the rest of the drama of his age to be obscured. Contemporary

to him was Ben Johnson, a classicist, a moralist and a reformer of drama. In comedy, Johnson's genius is found at its best and his influence was considerable. The Restoration dramatists leaned strongly upon him.

restoration Closing of theatres by the Puritans in 1642 brought this greatest of all periods in the history of English drama to an end. With the Civil wars no theatre existed between 1642 to 1660. The next phase which appeared after the Restoration produced a very different kind of dramatic literature. Dramatists like Chapman, Thomas Middleton, Webster and Dekker were at the forefront. Golden phase of drama ended.

When Charles II came back with the Restoration of 1660, the theatres were reopened. The Restoration comedy achieved its peculiar excellence. Drama developed into class drama with upper-class ethos. It lasted beyond this period into the first decade of the 18th century. Comedy in the early 18th century declined into sentimentalism. It became Comedy of Manners. George Etherege was its most important exponent. From such depths the drama was rescued by Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Sheridan. With Sheridan, something of the brilliance of restoration dialogue returned into comedy but with more ^{friendly} genial atmosphere. The characters were firmly presented with clarity, reminiscent of Johnson but with no depth in Sheridan's world, no new interpretation of human nature. In this he was nearer to Oscar Wilde than to Johnson.

standard came down (III) **Modern drama (Theatre)** : The modern theatre with its picture frame stage, its actresses taking female parts, its moveable scenery designed to create a visual image of the locale of each scene and its artificial light was developed during the Restoration period. There is clear influence of France on theatre, the audience and the themes.

The drama of the early 19th century was on the whole on the way to decline for many reasons. The theatre was home, mainly to irregular spectacle, melodrama and farce. A simple external reason can be found in the monopoly held by the two houses, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, for the performance of serious drama. The audiences which gathered to the 19th century theatre had not the intelligence or the imagination of the Elizabethan audience. The danger in the 19th century theatre was that, above all, it was unrelated to the life of the time. The changes in the structure of society had so modified the human personality itself that a new interpretation was essential.

Ibsen, the great Norwegian dramatist of the 19th century, dominates the realistic drama. He developed modernist, realist, social and psychological dramas like *The Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of the People*. They are far more subtle in stagecraft and profound in thought than anything in the modern English theatre. But it was only George Bernard Shaw who

was deeply influenced and affected by Ibsen's innovative contributions and experimentation. He was the most brilliant playwrights of his times. He alone had understood the greatness of Ibsen and he was determined that his own plays should also be a vehicle for ideas. The responsibility of elevation of the English drama to the brilliance of the Norwegian, fell with Oscar Wilde and G. B. Shaw in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The 20th century showed a talent in the drama with which the 19th century could not compete. H. Granville Barker, John Galsworthy, St. John Ervine were some of the playwrights who explored contemporary problems. St. John Ervine had been associated with a group of Irish dramatists whose work was normally produced in the Abbey theatre in Dublin. Much that is best in the modern drama in English developed from this movement. One of its originators was Lady Gregory with W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge. They were the most important dramatists of this Irish revival who used a sense of tragic irony, a violent species of humour and a rich and highly flavoured language.

T.S. Eliot experimented with Greek tragedy in the early forties of the 20th century. Other dramatists of the modern era, John Osborne, wrote on people who grew up after the Second World War. Kingsley Amis wrote about frustrated, anti-establishment young people. Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* brought a new vitality to the theatre scene. It was more a cultural phenomenon than the work of literature. Other important playwrights of the modern era include Anton Chekhov, Bertolt Brecht, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.

(IV) Indian drama (Theatre) :

Earliest seeds of modern Indian Drama can be found in the Sanskrit Drama from the first century A.D. *Mahabhasya* by Patanjali provides a feasible date for the beginning of theatre in India. The major source of evidence is 'A Treatise on Theatre' (Nāṭyaśāstra) by Bharat Muni is the most complete work of dramatology in the ancient world. It gives mythological account of the origin of theatre. Modern Indian drama, however, has influences from all over the world, as well as Sanskrit and Urdu traditions.

HISTORY OF DRAMA

PERIODS IN HISTORY	TYPES OF PLAYS	CLASSICS (PLAYS)
MEDIEVAL PERIOD (11 th to 15 th Century Reign of Henry VI)	- Didactic plays - Mystery plays / Miracle plays - Cycle plays, Morality plays	- <i>Robin Hood</i> by Howard Pyle, <i>Everyman</i> etc.
RENAISSANCE PERIOD (1600 to 1700, Reign of Elizabeth I and James I)	- Tragi-comedy - Melancholy - Revenge plays	- <i>Romeo And Juliet</i> (Tragedy), <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> (Comedy), <i>Henry IV</i> (Historical) by Shakespeare - <i>Dr. Faustus</i> and <i>Jew of Malta</i> by Christopher Marlowe - <i>Duchess of Malfi</i> by John Webster - <i>The Changeling</i> by Thomas Middleton
RESTORATION PERIOD (1660 onwards, Reign of Charles II)	- Heroic drama - Pathetic drama - Restoration comedy	- <i>All For Love</i> (Tragedy) by John Dryden - <i>The Way of The World</i> (Comedy) by William Congreve
VICTORIAN PERIOD (1837 to 1901, Reign of Queen Victoria)	All types of plays were performed	- <i>The Importance of being Earnest</i> by Oscar Wilde - <i>Candia</i> by G.B. Shaw - <i>A Doll's House</i> - <i>An Enemy of the People</i> } by Henrik Ibsen
MODERN PERIOD (1901 TO 1945)	- Stream of consciousness, - Absurd plays, - Poetic drama, - Radio drama	- <i>Pygmalion</i> by G.B.Shaw - <i>Murder in the Cathedral</i> (poetic drama) by T.S.Eliot
POST MODERN ERA (1945 to 2000)	- Almost all types of dramas were performed - Kitchen sink drama	- <i>Look Back in Anger</i> by John Osborne - <i>Waiting for Godot</i> by Samuel Beckett