

III. GENRES (TYPES) OF DRAMA

Genre is a French word meaning “category” or “type.” Some common genres of theater include drama, comedy, tragedy, parody, or absurd. Beware, though! An overemphasis on labels and categories must be avoided. Many plays try hard not to fit into any one category, and to make them do so robs theater of its immediacy and spontaneity.



III.1 ~ TRAGEDY AND OTHER SERIOUS DRAMA

Serious drama takes a thoughtful, sober attitude toward its subject matter. It puts the audience in a frame of mind to think carefully about what they are seeing and to become involved with the characters onstage: to love what these characters love, fear what they fear, and suffer what they suffer. The best-known form of serious drama is *tragedy*.

Tragedy asks very basic questions about human existence. Why are people sometimes so cruel to one another? Why is the world so unjust? Why are men and women called on to endure such suffering? What can humans achieve in the midst of cruelty and hopelessness? Tragedy assumes that the universe doesn't care about human concerns, or even that the universe is cruel toward humans. Sometimes the innocent appear to suffer while the evil prosper. In the face of this, some humans are capable of awful actions, while others can overcome these challenges and become noble and honorable.

The most noteworthy tragedies were produced in Greece in the 5th century B.C.E., in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, and in France in the 17th century. They include works like *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone* (Greek), *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear* (Shakespearean England), and many more.

The plot of a tragedy generally centers around a main character (the tragic hero or heroine) that is caught in a series of tragic circumstances. Oedipus, without realizing it, murders his father and marries his mother; Antigone must choose between death and dishonoring her dead brother; King Lear is cast out by the daughters to whom he has given his kingdom. In these tragedies, the universe seems determined to trap the hero or heroine in a fateful web. Eventually the plot moves in the following way: tragic circumstances → the situation leads to a sad point of no return, where the tragic character must move forward to their fate → the hero or heroine finally accepts responsibility for his/her actions and accepts the suffering that follows.

The question is, why do we like tragedies? What do we gain from them? When the elements of traditional tragedy are combined, they appear to produce two contradictory reactions at the same time. One is pessimistic: the heroes and heroines are “damned if they do and damned if they don't,” and the world is cruel. The other reaction though is more positive; it is a reaction to the heroes and heroines themselves. These characters meet their fate with such honor and determination, that they defy the gods. They say, “Come and get me. Whatever happens, I'll never surrender my individuality, and I'll never stop being me.”

Another important type of serious drama is the *melodrama*. In this form, the emphasis is on suspense and excitement. Melodrama is exaggerated theater, with dramatic music chords playing in the background. Sometimes it is so serious it appears laughable—we have all seen silent movies where a heroine with blond curls is being pursued by a heartless villain, a man with an evil moustache who will either get the girl to marry her or tie her to a railroad track. Movies today still use many elements from melodrama. In melodrama,

1. The audience is drawn into the action.
2. The issues are clear-cut, and there is a strong separation between right and wrong.
3. The characters are clearly recognizable as “good” or “bad.”
4. The action is exaggerated, with the main characters always living in danger and on the edge of chaos.
5. There is a strong emphasis on suspense.

III.2 ~ COMEDY AND TRAGICOMEDY

People who create *comedy* are not necessarily less serious or less concerned with important matters than people who create dramas; they may be extremely serious in their own ways. Writers of this genre though understand the mistakes and ridiculousness of human behavior, and by putting these follies on display they can make the audience laugh while showing us these weaknesses.

Characteristics of Comedy

1. **Suspension of natural laws:** In comedy, laws like cause and effect, probability, and logic fly out the window. Actions do not have the consequences they have in real life. For example, if a man slips on a banana peel and falls on his back, we are not worried whether or not he's hurt. The focus in comedy is on his tripping in the first place.
2. **The comic premise:** this is an idea or concept that turns the accepted notion of things upside down. This is the main idea (usually not possible in real life) that makes the basis of the play's plot. For example, in *The Birds*, two ordinary men convince a flock of birds to build a city between heaven and earth.

Techniques of Comedy

1. **Verbal humor:** This can be anything from a pun to witty dialogue. A *pun* – usually considered the simplest form of wit – is a humorous use of words with the same sound but different meanings. A man who says he is going to start a bakery if he can “raise the dough” is making a pun.
2. **Comedy of character:** Here, the difference lies in the way characters see themselves or pretend to be, and the way they actually are. Take, for example, the man character in *The Music Man*, who pretends to be a band director but is actually a con man who doesn't know the first thing about music.
3. **Plot complications:** these can include ridiculous coincidences or mistaken identity. Take, for example, the recent movie *Date Night*, in which an ordinary married couple are mistaken for violent criminal masterminds.

Example Forms of Comedy

1. **Farce:** this is an exaggerated type of comedy that emphasizes outrageous characters, extreme plot complications, and verbal wit. Mock violence, rapid movement, and a fast pace are common. Think the “Scary Movie” franchise.
2. **Satire:** this uses wit, irony, and exaggeration to attack or expose evil and foolishness. The show *The Simpsons* is highly satirical.
3. **Domestic comedy:** This usually deals with family situations, and it is found most frequently today in television, on shows such as *How I Met Your Mother* or *The Bernie Mac Show*.

In all its forms, comedy remains a way of looking at the world in which basic values are asserted but natural laws are ignored in order to underline human foolishness.

Tragicomedy. Authentic tragicomedy carefully combines two elements—one serious, the other comic. We laugh and cry at the same time. Some commentators feel that this is the form most truly characteristic of our time. It has become the many approach of many of today's best playwrights. Consider, for example, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*

Theater of the Absurd. After World War II, a new type of theater emerged. *Theater of the absurd* reflects humanity's sense of alienation and its sense of loss after the tragedy of world war. People found the world illogical, cruel, and ridiculous. Nothing made sense and nothing had purpose. Absurdist plays suggest the idea of absurdity in two ways: both in what they say (their content) and in how they say it (their form). In other words, the structure rarely looks like a normal storyline. In absurd theater, the dialogue never makes sense, and what one person says may not connect at all to what someone else just said.

A prime example is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In this play Beckett has given us one of the most telling expressions of loneliness and futility ever written. There is nothing more hopeless than two homeless men waiting every day for a supreme being called “Godot,” who they think will come but who never does. But they themselves are comic.



III.3 ~ MUSICAL THEATER

At many points in theater history, music and dance have been combined with drama. During the 1900s though American artists began to develop musical theater as a distinct art form, in terms of both music itself and its integration with the traditional dramatic structure. Types of musical theater include:

1. *opera*: a drama set entirely to music
2. *operetta*: scenes of spoken dialogue alternating with songs
3. *musical comedy*: a light, comic story interspersed with popular music
4. *the musical (or musical theater)*: which evolved from musical comedy, but can be either serious or funny, and often has a heavy emphasis on visual appeal and choreography (group dancing)
5. *the revue*: a series of individual, independent songs and comic sketches

The modern musical is largely an American creation—the only theatrical form developed primarily in the United States. The American musical began to take shape in the early 20th century. During the 1920s and 1930s, musical comedy emerged: comic, sometimes silly stories that had glorious music with intelligent, witty lyrics, written by people like Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, and Lorenz Hart. The period from the 1940s to late 1960s was the golden age of the American musical, though, with a large quantity of successful shows. These musicals integrated

dancing
an overall
great
unity.

and singing to form
structure that had
variety as well as

