

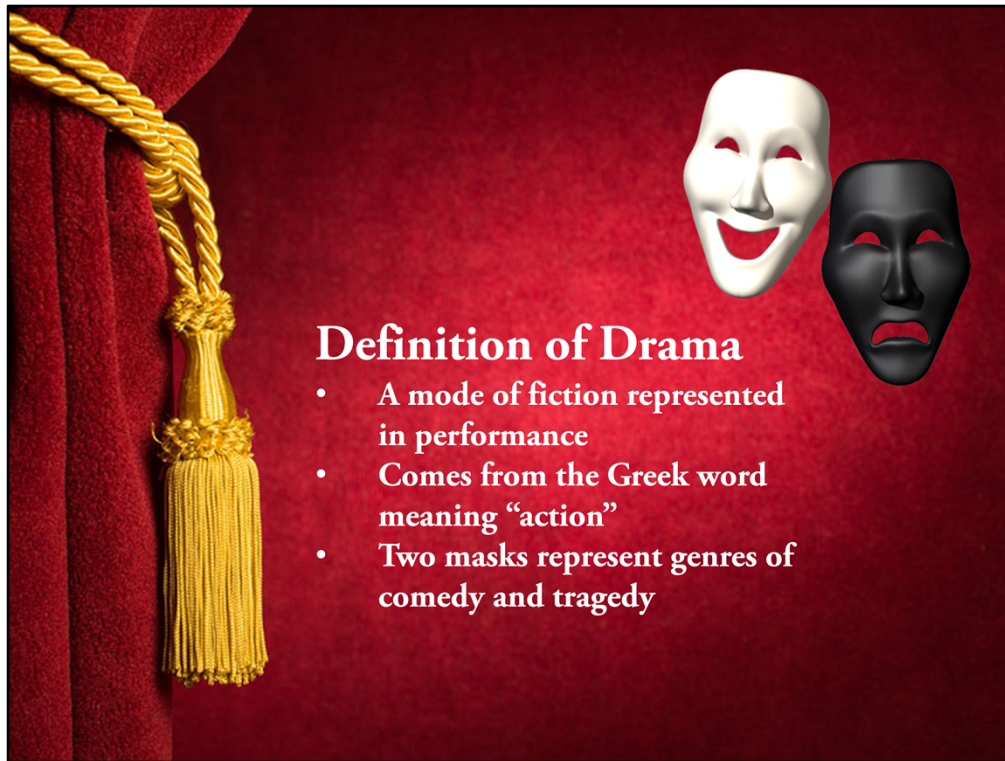
**Module 4: Drama in American Literature**  
**Topic 2 Content: The History of Drama**



The History of Drama

## Module 4: Drama in American Literature

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Drama is a mode of fiction that is represented in performance. The term *drama* comes from the Greek word meaning "action." You may already recognize the universal symbol for drama: two masks in which one is smiling and the other is crying. These masks represent the genres of comedy and tragedy.

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### Ancient Drama

- Developed by Thespis in ancient Greece
- First to impersonate a single character
- Chorus of singer-dancers
- Thespian = actor
- Only thirty-two Greek plays survive today



Dramas were first developed by Thespis in ancient Greece. Thespis was the first to impersonate a single character and had a chorus of singer-dancers. His name is the source of the word *thespian*, which means "actor." The Greeks produced hundreds of plays, but only thirty-two survive today.



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### Medieval Drama

- Very different from Greek drama
- Usually performed in churches as part of services
- Over time, they grew more elaborate and secular



Medieval drama was very different from Greek drama. Usually performed in churches as part of services, medieval plays involved religious holiday stories acted out by priests. Over time, they grew more elaborate and secular.



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**Elizabethan Drama**

- 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in England
- William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and others
- Comedy, tragedy, and history
- The Globe Theater
- Only men were permitted to act

The Elizabethan era of drama occurred in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century England. It encompassed the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and many others. Elizabethan dramas usually involved three genres: comedy, tragedy, and history. The most famous Elizabethan theater was the Globe Theater where well-known acting companies performed on its stage. Because only men were permitted to act, they even played the roles of women.

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### 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the Restoration


- Theaters were established as a result of the Restoration of the monarchy in England
- Socially and politically motivated
- Included witty satire
- Women began to appear on stage



In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, theaters were established as a result of the Restoration of the monarchy. Most dramas during this time period were socially and politically motivated. They often included witty satire. Another important development during this period was the appreciation of female thespians as women began to appear on stage.

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### 19<sup>th</sup> Century and The Romantic Rebellion


- Romantics focused on imagination and experience over reason and logic
- Melodrama: a new genre
- Simplistic settings with basic themes of good versus evil
- *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
  - Based on the legend of a man who makes a bargain with the devil

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Romantics focused on imagination and experience over reason and logic. Melodramas emerged as a new genre during this time. Using very simplistic settings, melodramas had basic themes of good versus evil. One of the most famous dramas of this time period was *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Faust* is based on the legend of a man who makes a bargain with the devil.




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### 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Modern Drama

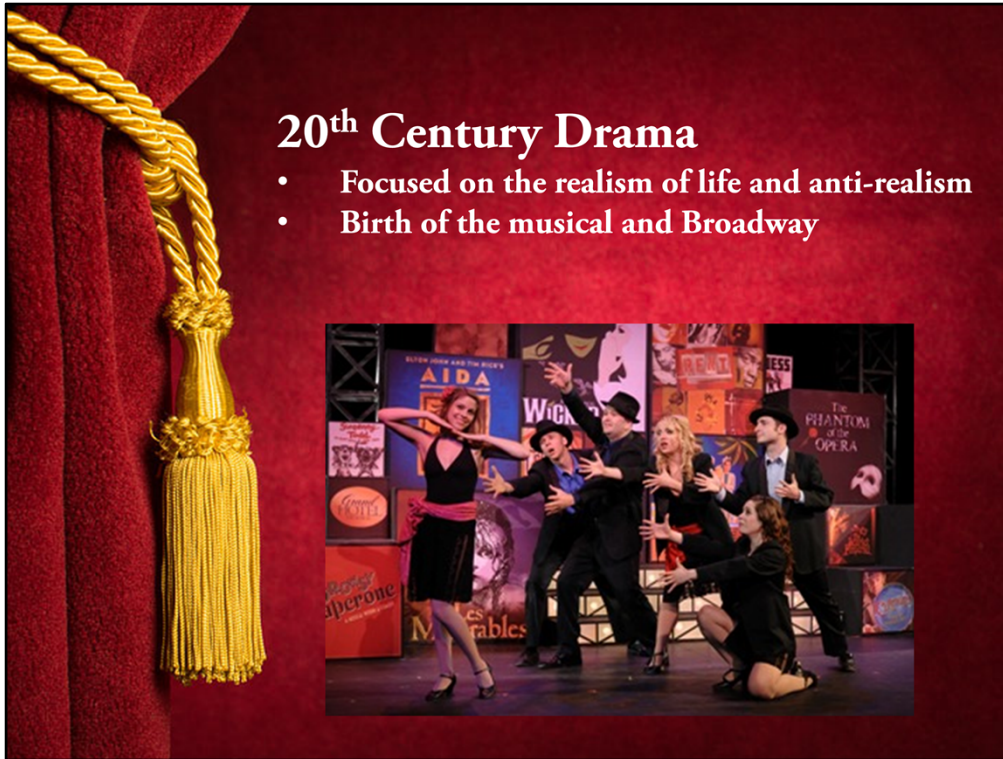
- Realism surfaced with ordinary characters
- Industrial Revolution improved safety with gas lighting
- Actors were poorly paid
- Focus not on acting but action: changing and flying scenery, elevators, and revolving stages



Also in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Realism surfaced in theater, offering ordinary characters with whom patrons could identify. The Industrial Revolution that occurred during this time period significantly improved the safety of theater performance with the invention of gas lighting, which was used to illuminate the stage. However, actors were poorly paid during this time period; the focus was not on acting but action. Changing and flying scenery, elevators, and revolving stages were popular.


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### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Drama

- Focused on the realism of life and anti-realism
- Birth of the musical and Broadway



During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, drama focused on the realism of life as well as anti-realism. During this time period, the musical was born and Broadway emerged as the center of drama in America.

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## Drama

- Playwright - the author
- Actors - people who perform
- Acts - the units of action
- Scenes - parts of the acts



Every drama has four integral components. The playwright is the author of the drama. Each drama must have actors who perform the action laid out by the playwright. Most dramas are broken down into acts, or major units of action within the drama. Additionally, acts are broken down into scenes.



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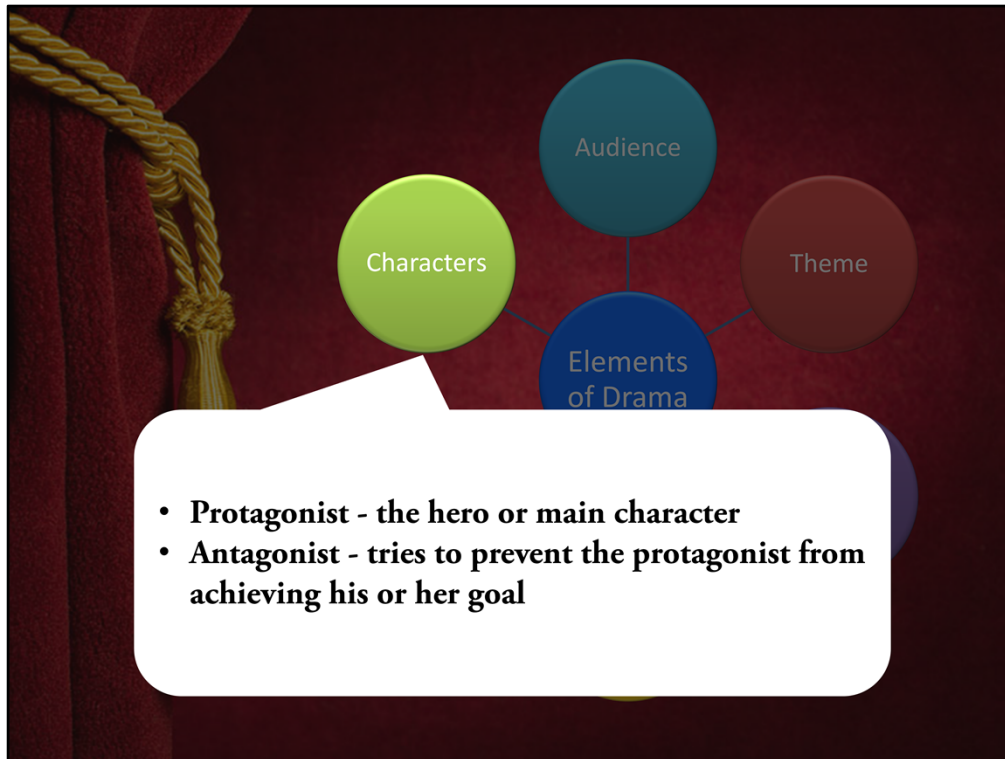
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The elements of drama are very much the same as the elements of narration. A drama would not be complete without an audience to view the performance. Generally, the audience experiences the play vicariously but may sometimes take on a more participatory role. It would be false to assume that the actors have an effect on the audience but not the other way around. In fact, the audience and actors affect and respond to one another. It is this interplay of emotional responses back and forth between the audience and the cast that makes a dramatic performance successful.

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The protagonist is usually the hero or main character, and the antagonist tries to prevent the protagonist from achieving his or her goal.

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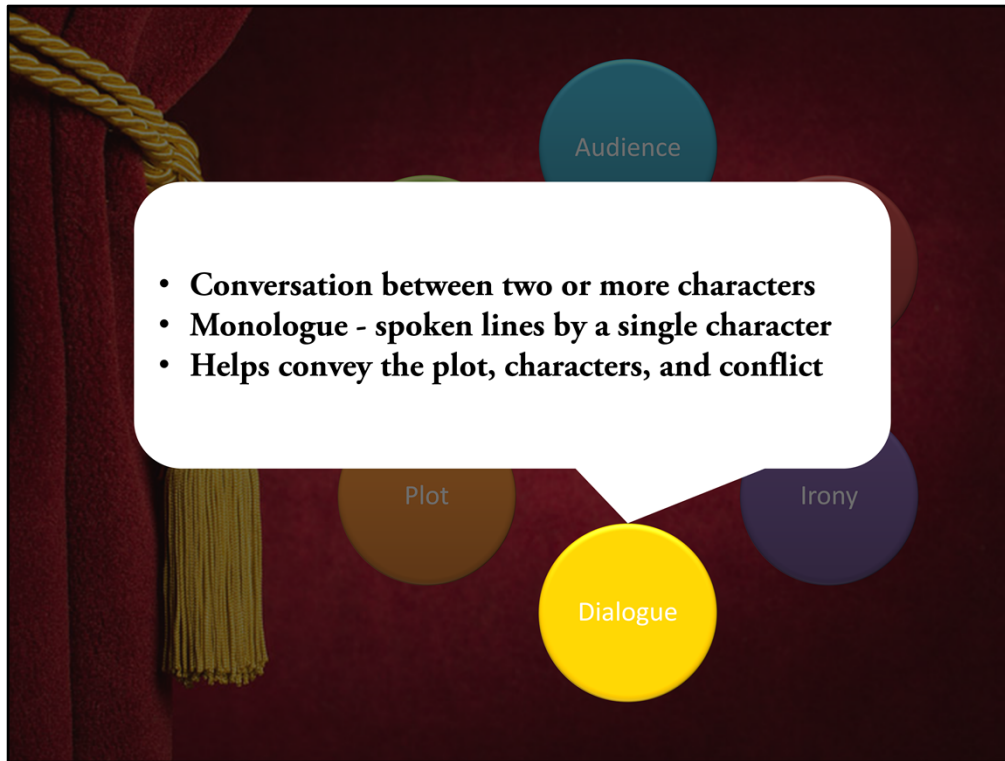


Within the plot, there must be conflict, or opposition, that the protagonist struggles to overcome to achieve the goal. The conflict should be resolved by the end of the play.



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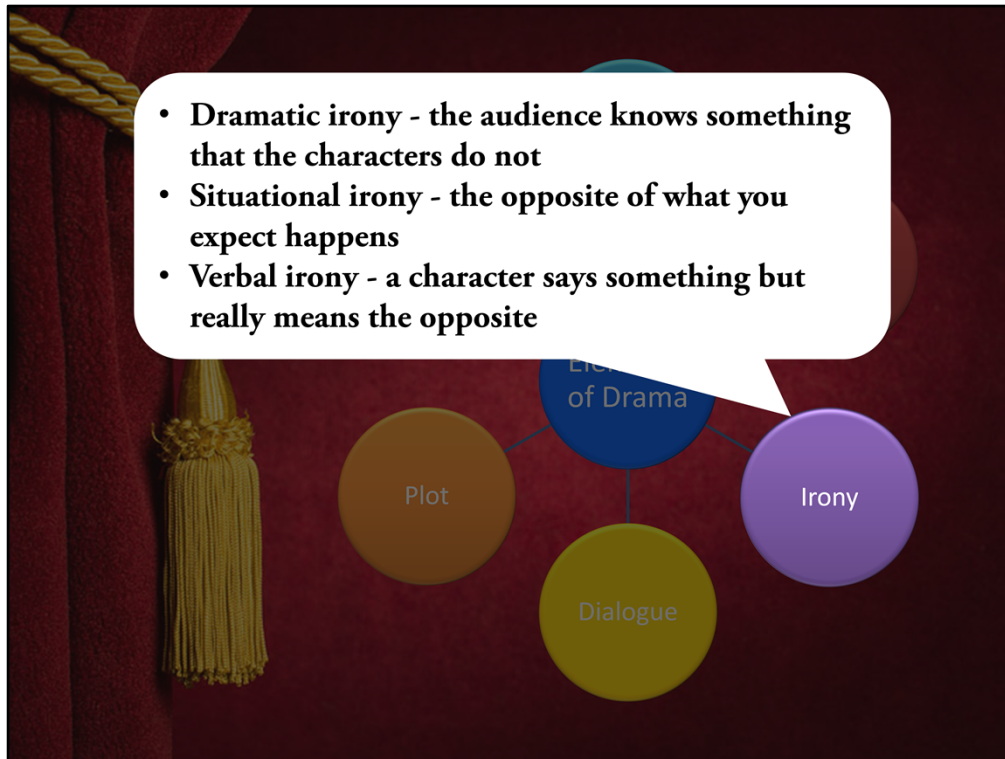
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Dialogue, or the conversation between two or more characters, is vital to a play because it is the essence of conveying the plot. Lines spoken by an actor may also take the form of a monologue, which is spoken by a single character as opposed to an interaction between characters. When reading a play, the combination of dialogue and the action helps to convey the plot, characters, and conflict.

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Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows something that the characters do not. Situational irony occurs when the opposite of what you expect happens. Verbal irony, which is the most complicated, occurs when a character says something but really means the opposite.

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When the play is resolved, the audience should be left with a theme, or universal message presented by the play. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, one theme might be the destructive nature that love can have over an individual. Remember, a theme is a statement, not just a topic.

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### Dramatic Conventions

- Soliloquy
- Aside
- Narrator
- Flashback
- Stage directions



Dramatic conventions are the strategies a playwright uses to craft his or her play. Some of these conventions are also used in novels, short stories, and even movies. A soliloquy is a speech given by one character onstage when he or she is all alone. The point of the speech is to reveal the inner feelings of the character. An aside is a private dialogue between two characters that the audience hears while the other characters on stage do not. Some plays have a narrator who may or may not be a character in the play. Just like a novel, a play may have a flashback. This is when a scene shifts from the present to the past. The purpose of a flashback is to explain something in the past that might clearly be affecting the present action of the play. Stage directions are important because they help the director understand the tone of the speech or movement of the characters. When reading a play, you can recognize the stage directions easily because they are usually written in italics.



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There are many elements of stagecraft. Theater space is where the play will be performed. Most plays will be held in traditional spaces like playhouses and theaters. However, some plays may be performed outside on a lawn or in alternative theaters like black boxes or round stages. The set includes backdrops and items that will be on stage. Lighting can be the spotlight that shines on the actors or special lighting that conveys a specific feeling or special effect. Costumes are a very important element that helps actors transform into the characters that they portray. Sometimes special sounds are needed. For example, if it is storming during a scene, then sounds of thunder and lightning might be piped through the auditorium. Props are the handheld objects with which the characters interact. During Shakespearean times, actors had to be skilled in fencing and stage fighting, involving the use of sabers, swords, or daggers. The props will depend upon the setting and nature of the play.

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### The Action

- Staging, blocking, and moving
- Director's interpretation
- Actor influence: command of performance



There are a few components of a play's action. Staging, blocking, and moving are ways the actor moves across the stage. This must be carefully choreographed so that too many people are not clumped to one side of the stage. The actors want to fill the space and keep their dialogue toward the audience, not away from the audience. A director's interpretation is the way in which the director envisions the play. For example, there are different ways to interpret *Romeo and Juliet*. Is Romeo a strong and defiant young man? Is Romeo lost and in love with the idea of being in love? What will the set look like? What will the concept be? Sometimes a director will take a more traditional play and put it in a modern-day setting. The possibilities are endless. Finally, actor influence refers to a thespian's command of performance. Something as subtle as an actor's tone of voice can impact the performance of a play. Each actor brings his or her own interpretation of the character to the stage.

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**Famous Plays and Playwrights**

- *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles
- *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare
- *Our Town* by Oscar Wilde
- *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein



These are a few famous plays with which you may be familiar: *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *Our Town* by Oscar Wilde, and *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein.