

Banha University - Faculty of Arts
English Department
First Year Students

Introduction to Criticism
Lecture 5

Dr Iman A. Hanafy
Professor of English Literature
Faculty of Arts- Banha University

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Reading Plays

Reading Plays

- The distinctive appearance of a script, with its stage directions, character parts, and divisions into acts, identifies drama as a unique form of literature. A play is written for the theater-to be performed in front of an audience by actors who take on the roles of the characters and who present the story through dialogue and action. Thus drama is different from novels and short stories, which are meant to be read.

As a literary genre,

- drama has affinities with fiction, poetry, and the essay. Like fiction, drama possesses a narrative dimension: a play often narrates a story in the form of a plot. Like fiction, drama relies on dialogue and description, which takes the form of stage directions, lines describing characters, scenes, or actions with clues to production. Unlike fiction, however, in which a narrator often mediates between us and the story, there is no such authorial presence in drama. Instead, we hear the words of the characters directly. Drama develops primarily by means of dialogue, the lines spoken by the characters. The plot and the action of drama unfold on the stage as the characters interact.

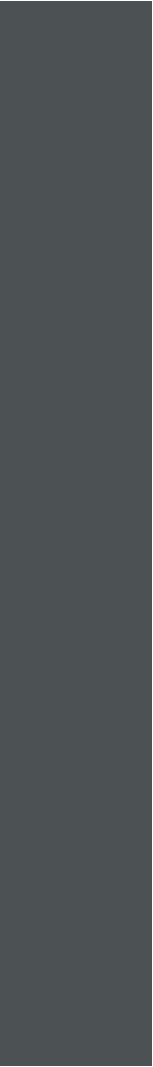
Further.....

- In addition, playwrights employ various techniques to compensate for the absence of a narrator. For example, playwrights use monologues-extended speeches by one character. (A monologue in which a character expresses private thoughts while alone on the stage is called a soliloquy.) Playwrights can also use asides-brief comments by an actor who addresses the audience but is assumed not to be heard by the other characters on the stage-to reveal the thoughts and motivations of the speaker. Like the observations of a narrator, these dramatic devices give the audience insight into a character's real motives and attitudes.



In addition,

- makeup, costumes, scenery, lighting, and gestures enhance a dramatic performance. Finally, actors and directors apply their creative instincts to the script, interpreting the dialogue and stage directions in various ways and even changing it from performance to performance.



Drama shares
features with
poetry as well

- Plays may, in fact, be written in verse: Shakespeare wrote in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), Moliere in rhymed couplets. Plays, like lyric poems, are also overheard: we listen to characters expressing their concerns as if there were no audience present. Poems also contain dramatic elements. The dramatic lyrics and monologues of Robert Browning and some of the poems of John Donne portray characters speaking and listening to one another.

Kinds of Drama



TRAGEDY



COMEDY



Tragedy

- In his Poetics Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) sums up ancient Greek thinking about drama when he writes that a tragedy is a drama treating a serious subject and involving persons of significance. According to Aristotle, when the members of an audience see a good tragedy, they feel both pity (and thus closeness to the protagonist) and fear (and thus revulsion) because they recognize in themselves the potential for similar reactions. The purging of these emotions that the audience experiences as they see the dramatic action unfold before them is called catharsis. For this catharsis to occur, the protagonist of a tragedy must be worthy of the audience's attention and sympathy.

Tragedy

- According to Aristotle, the protagonist of a tragedy is neither all good nor all evil, but a mixture of the two. He is like the rest of us-only more exalted and possessing some weakness or flaw (hamartia). This tragic flaw-perhaps narrowness of vision or overwhelming pride (hubris)-is typically the element that creates the conditions for tragedy.

Central to tragedy

- is dramatic irony (sometimes called tragic irony), which emerges from a situation in which the audience knows more about the dramatic situation than a character does. As a result, the character's words and actions may be consistent with what he or she expects but at odds with what the audience knows will happen. Thus a character may say or do something that causes the audience to infer a meaning beyond what the character intends or realizes. The dramatic irony is clear, for example, when Oedipus announces that whoever has disobeyed the dictates of the gods will be exiled. The audience knows, although Oedipus does not, that he has just condemned himself.

tragedy-usually....

- At some point in a tragedy-usually after the climax-the protagonist recognizes the reasons for his or her downfall. It is this recognition (and the accompanying acceptance) that elevates tragic protagonists to their grandeur and gives their suffering meaning. Without this recognition there would be no tragedy, just pathos-suffering that exists simply to satisfy the sentimental or morbid sensibilities of the audience. In spite of the death of the protagonist, then, tragedy causes the audience to experience a sense of elation.



Comedy

- A comedy is a dramatic work that treats themes and characters with humor and typically has a happy ending. Whereas tragedy focuses on the hidden dimensions of the tragic hero's character, comedy concentrates on the public persona, the protagonist as a social being. Tragic figures are typically seen in isolation, questioning the meaning of their lives and trying to comprehend their suffering. Hamlet-draped in sable, longing for death, and self-consciously contemplating his duty-illustrates the isolation of the tragic hero.

Unlike tragic heroes,

- comic figures are seen in the public arena where people intentionally assume the masks of pretension and self-importance. The purpose of comedy is to strip away these masks and expose human beings for what they are. Whereas tragedy reveals the nobility of the human condition, comedy demonstrates its inherent folly, portraying human beings as selfish, hypocritical, vain, weak, irrational, and capable of self-delusion. Thus the basic function of comedy is critical-to tell people that things are not what they seem and that appearances are not necessarily reality. In the comic world nothing is solid or predictable, and accidents and coincidence are more important to the plot than reason.

the plot of a comedy

- Comedies typically rely on certain familiar plot devices. Many comedies begin with a startling or unusual situation that attracts the audience's attention. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (p. 1478), for example, Theseus, the Duke of Athens, rules that Hermia will either marry the man her father has chosen for her or be put to death. Such an event could lead to tragedy if comedy did not intervene to save the day. Comedy often depends on obstacles and hindrances to further its plot: The more difficult the problems the lovers face, the more satisfying their eventual triumph will be. For this reason the plot of a comedy is usually more complex than the plot of a tragedy. Compare the rather straightforward plot of *Hamlet*- a prince ordered to avenge his murdered father's death is driven mad with indecision and, after finally acting decisively, is killed himself.

Finally,

- comedies have happy endings. Whereas tragedy ends with death, comedy ends by affirming life. Eventually the confusion and misunderstandings reach a point where some resolution must be achieved: The difficulties of the lovers are overcome, the villains are banished, and the lovers marry-or at least express their intention to do so. In this way the lovers establish their connection with the rest of society, and its values are affirmed.