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# Plays

## A Study Guide

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# PLAYS

## Toward a Definition

A play is a dramatic work that is performed before a live audience. It is usually presented on a stage by a cast of actors and actresses. The structure of plays is made up of acts and scenes. Typically there are two to three acts and several scenes within each act; however, there are also one-act plays.

## History

Virtually every civilization throughout the world has a theatrical tradition. The earliest performances were those ofprimitive tribes, in which they enacted the stories from history or mythology, or requested a favor from their gods, such as a successful hunt. Our Western theater tradition begins with the ancient Greeks. Their theater originally was a bowl-shaped hillside that then developed, around the fifth century B.C., into what is called the classic outdoor theater. Our word for theater derives from the Greek word, theatron, which meant a hillside hollow which was full of seats.

The Greek plays often were stories of the people and their gods; usually the plays had one actor and a chorus of twelve to fifty people, which commented upon the performance and accompanied the action of the play. In tragedies a noble protagonist faced ruin at the end of the play, usually because of a good quality as well as a flaw in his personality. In comedies, an amusing form of drama, the play ended happily.

The Greeks dedicated their plays to *Dionysus,* the Greek god of wine and the power and fertility of nature. Perhaps the most famous playwrights were the tragedians Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, and the comedian Aristophanes. Another playwright was Thespis (from whom we get the word *thespian,* or actor). Many Greek plays that are still performed today include Sophocles' *Electra* and *Oedipus Rex* and Euripedes' *Oedipus Rex*.

The Roman theater began in the third century B.C. The Romans translated many of the Greek plays, but they did not use a chorus or employ drama in the same way as the Greeks. Roman theater was dominated byvariety entertainment – dancing, animal acts, comedies and pantomime. They also had performances during their religious festivals and in commemoration of historic occasions.

Seneca is the best known Roman playwright. Nine of his plays survive to this day, including *Medea, Agamemnon, Phaedra* and *Oedipus*. Two comic playwrights, Plautus and Terence, wrote plays that still survive today: *The Persian* and *The Carthaginian* by Plautus and *Mother-in-Law* and *The Brothers* by Terence.

During the Middle Ages the religious drama was the most imporant dramatic type. The Hours, which were services that changed daily, lent themselves to dramatic innovation. Church holy seasons, such as Easter, when the passion of Christ was performed, provided important opportunities to commemorate religious events in drama. Also, traveling amateur actors toured and produced mystery, miracle and morality plays.

## GLOSSARY OF THEATER TERMS

| | |
|---|---|
| Acts | sections or major divisions of a play. |
| Action | the happenings – psychological, emotional and physical – that convey the meaning and story of the play. |
| Antagonist | the force or person that opposes the protagonist in solving a problem or resolving a conflict. |
| Anticlimax | a ludicrous or disappointing outcome of a situation or series of events. |
| Characterization | the development of a character through what the character says and does and through other characters' comments. |
| Climax | the moment of greatest dramatic intensity or turning point in the action. |
| Comedy | a form of drama that is light and amusing and usually has a happy ending. |
| Conflict | the struggle between two opposing forces, ideas or beliefs, which is the basis of the plot. |
| Denouement | the unraveling of the plot, following the climax, in which the writer explains how and why everything turned out as it did. |
| Dialect | the speech that is characteristic of a particular region, usually of a class or group of people. |
| Dialogue | the conversation between two or more characters in a play. |
| Director | the person in charge of the way actors move on stage and speak their lines. |
| Dramatic irony | an event that occurs or words spoken in a play in which the audience is aware of something that a character on stage does not know. |
| Falling action | the action following the climax; also referred to as resolution or denouement. |
| Foreshadowing | the dropping of hints by the the author to prepare the reader for what is to come. |
| Irony | a mode of expression in which the author says one thing and means the opposite. The term also applies to a situation whose outcome is opposite of what was expected. |
| Leading lady or man | the most important male or female character, usually with a romantic interest. |

## COSTUMES ON STAGE

Costumes play an important role in conveying time and place, social standing and personality to the audience. Choose two characters in a play you have read and describe in detail what each should wear. Accompany your description with a handdrawn illustration or a copy of a picture of appropriate attire.

Play _____

Playwright _____

| **Character** | **Character** |
|---|---|
| **Description** | **Description** |
| **Illustration** | **Illustration** |

## PROPS

Props is short for *stage properties:* that is, anything necessary to the action of the play, which does not include costumes, scenery or furniture. *Trim props* are the props which the *property manager* puts on the stage, such as telephones, books and coffee cups. *Hand props* are those which an actor is given before he or she goes on the stage, such as hats, newspapers or letters. Choose one scene from a play you have read to answer the following questions:

Play _____

Playwright _____

Act _____, Scene _____

1. Name five trim props that should be on stage and tell why each is important.

| **Prop** | **Explanation** |
|---|---|
| | |

2. Name five hand props that should be brought into the scene and tell why each is important.

| **Prop** | **Explanation** |
|---|---|
| | |

## A CHARACTER

A character's personality is revealed on stage by what this character says and does and by the reactions and remarks of other characters. Select a play you have read that has an interesting character.

Play _____

Playwright _____

Character _____

List five adjectives that would describe this character.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Provide one example to illustrate how each of these characteristics is revealed.

| **Characteristic** | **How it is revealed** |
|---|---|
| | |