Introduction: Thinking about Drama

The word *drama* comes from an early Greek word, *dran*, meaning "to do something." Drama implies doing something of considerable importance. In modern terms, a dramatic action is the plot or storyline of a play. The ingredients of any drama are the plot; the characters, represented on stage by actors; their actions, described by gestures and movement; thought—the ideas in the play—revealed in dialogue and behavior; spectacle, represented by scenery, music, costume, and lighting; and, finally, audiences who respond to the entire mixture.

When we are in the theater, we see the actors, hear the lines, are aware of the setting, and sense the theatrical community of which we are a part. Even when reading a play, we should imagine actors speaking lines and visualize a setting in which those lines are spoken. Drama is an experience in which we participate on many levels simultaneously. On one level, we may believe that what we see is really happening; on another level, we know it is only make-believe. On one level we may be amused, but on another level we realize that serious statements about human nature are being made. Drama both entertains and instructs.

**What Is Drama?**

When Aristotle wrote about drama in the *Poetics*, a work providing one of the earliest and most influential theories of drama, he began by explaining drama as the imitation of an action (mimesis). Those analyzing his work have interpreted this statement in several ways. One interpretation is that drama imitates life. On the surface, this observation may seem simple, even obvious. But on reflection, we begin to find complex significance in his comment. The drama of the Greeks, for example, with its intense mythic structure, its formidable speeches, and its profound actions, often seems larger than life or other than life. Yet we recognize characters saying words that we ourselves are capable of saying, doing things that we ourselves might do. The great Greek tragedies are certainly lifelike and certainly offer literary mirrors in which we can examine human nature. And the same is true of Greek comedies.

The relationship between drama and life has always been subtle and complex. In some plays, such as Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, it is one of the central issues. We begin our reading or viewing of most
plays knowing that the dramatic experience is not absolutely real in the sense that, for example, the actor playing Hamlet does not truly die or truly see a ghost or truly frighten his mother. The play imitates those imagined actions, but when done properly it is realistic enough to make us fear, if only for a moment, that they could be real.

We see significance in the actions Hamlet imitates; his actions help us live our own lives more deeply, more intensely, because they give us insight into the possibilities of life. In an important sense, we share the experience of a character such as Hamlet when, for example, he soliloquizes over the question of whether it is better to die than to live in a world filled with sin and crime. We are all restricted to living this life as ourselves; drama is one art form that helps us realize the potential of life, for both the good and the bad.

Drama and Ritual

Such imaginative participation is only a part of what we derive from drama. In its origins, drama seems to have evolved from ancient Egyptian and Greek rituals, ceremonies that were performed the same way again and again and were thought to have a propitious effect on the relationship between the people and their gods.

In ancient Egypt, some religious rituals evolved into repeated passion plays, such as those celebrating Isis and Osiris at the festivals of Heb-Seb at Sakkara some three thousand years ago. Greek drama was first performed during yearly religious celebrations dedicated to the god Dionysus. The early Greek playwrights, such as Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, emphasized the interaction between the will of the gods and the will of human beings, often pitting the truths of men and women against the truths of the gods. The interpretation of the myths by the Greek playwrights over a two-hundred-year period helped the Greek people participate in the myths, understand them, and relate them to their daily lives.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, drama thrived in Japan, reaching a pinnacle in the Nō drama of Zeami Motokiyo and his father, Kan'ami. Japanese Nō drama combines music and movement in intricate patterns of ritualistic formality. Nō developed in a Buddhist environment and expressed the deep religious values associated with Buddhism. Although it began as a provincial form, the beauty of Nō—its deep meditative pauses and extraordinary dance-like movement—quickly made it the major style of drama in medieval Japan.

The rebirth of Western drama in the Middle Ages—after the fall of Rome and the loss of classical artistic traditions—took place first in monasteries, then later in and about the cathedrals of Europe. It evolved from medieval religious ceremonies that helped the faithful understand more about their own moral predicament. *Everyman*, a late play in the medieval theater (it was written about 1500), concerns itself with the central issue of reward and punishment for the immortal soul after this life.

Drama: The Illusion of Reality

From the beginning, drama has had the capacity to hold up an illusion of reality like the reflection in a mirror: we take the reality for granted while recognizing that it is nonetheless illusory. As we have seen, Aristotle described drama, or dramatic illusion, as an imitation of an action. But unlike the reflection in a mirror, the action of most drama is drawn not from our actual experience of
life but from our potential or imagined experience. In the great Greek dramas, the illusion includes the narratives of ancient myths that were thought to offer profound illumination.

Different ages have had different approaches to representing reality onstage. Greek actors spoke in verse and wore masks. Except in the case of some comedies and satyr plays, the staging consisted of very little setting and no special costumes. Medieval drama was sometimes acted on pageant wagons and carts, but the special machinery developed to suggest hellfire and the presence of devils was said to be so realistic as to be frightening. Audiences of the Elizabethan age (named for Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 to 1603) were accustomed to actors who spoke directly to the crowds at their feet near the apron of the stage. All Elizabethan plays were done in essentially contemporary clothing, often with no more scenery than a suggestion in the spoken descriptions of the players. The actors recited their lines in verse, except when the author had a particular reason to use prose—for example, to imply that the speaker was of low social station. Yet Elizabethans reported that their theater was much like life itself.

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fairies, enchantments, an ass's head on the shoulders of a man all are presented as illusions, and we accept them. They inform the audience—in Shakespeare's day and in modern times—not by showing us ourselves in a mirror but by demonstrating that even fantastic realities have significance for us.

Certainly *A Midsummer Night's Dream* gives us insight into the profound range of human emotions. We learn about the pains of rejection when we see Helena longing for Demetrius, who in turn longs for Hermia. We learn about jealousy and possessiveness when we see Oberon cast a spell on his wife, Titania, over a dispute concerning a changeling. And we learn, too, about the worldly ambitions of the "rude mechanicals" who themselves put on a play whose reality they fear might frighten their audience. They solve the problem by reminding their audience that it is only a play and that they need not fear that reality will spoil their pleasure.

In modern drama, the dramatic illusion of reality includes not just the shape of an action, the events, and the characters but also the details of everyday life. When the action changes locale, the setting changes as well. Some contemporary playwrights make an effort to re-create a reality close to the one we live in. Some modern plays, such as August Wilson's *Fences*, make a precise representation of reality a primary purpose, shaping the tone of the language to reflect the way modern people speak, re-creating contemporary reality in the setting, language, and other elements of the drama.

But describing a play as an illusion of reality in no way means that it represents the precise reality that we take for granted in our everyday experience. Rather, drama ranges widely and explores multiple realities, some of which may seem very close to our own and some of which may seem improbably removed from our everyday experience.

For an audience, drama is one of the most powerful artistic experiences. When we speak about participating in drama, we mean that as a member of the audience we become a part of the action that unfolds. This is a mysterious phenomenon.
When we see a play today, we are usually seated in a darkened theater looking at a lighted stage. In ages past, this contrast was not the norm. Greek plays took place outdoors during the morning and the afternoon; most Elizabethan plays were staged outdoors in the afternoon; in the Renaissance, some plays began to be staged indoors with ingenious systems of lighting that involved candles and reflectors. In the early nineteenth century, most theaters used gaslight onstage; electricity took over in the later part of the century, and its use has grown increasingly complex. In most large theaters today, computerized lighting boards have replaced Renaissance candles.

Sitting in the darkness has made the experience of seeing Greek and Elizabethan plays much different for us than it was for the original audiences. We do not worry about being seen by the “right people” or about studying the quality of the audience, as people did during the Restoration in the late seventeenth century. The darkness isolates us from all except those who sit adjacent to us. Yet we instantly respond when others in the audience laugh, when they gasp, when they shift restlessly. We recognize in those moments that we are part of a larger community drawn together by theater and that we are all involved in the dramatic experience.

Different kinds of theaters make differing demands on actors and audiences. Despite its huge size, the open arena style theater of the early Greeks brought the audience into a special kind of intimacy with the actors. The players came very close to the first rows of seats, and the acoustics sometimes permitted even a whisper onstage to be audible in the far seats. The Greek theater also imparted a sense of formality to the occasion of drama. For one thing, its symmetry and circularity were accompanied by a relatively rigid seating plan. Public officials and nobility sat in special seats. Then each section of the theater was given over to specific families, and the less desirable edges of the seating area were devoted to travelers and strangers to the town. One knew one’s place in the Greek theater. Its regularity gave the community a sense of order.

Medieval theater also gave its audiences a sense of community, both when it used playing areas called mansions inside and outside the churches and when it used wagons wheeled about in processions in the streets or outside the city walls. That the medieval theater repeated the same cycles of plays again and again for about two hundred years, to the delight of many European communities, tells us something about the stability of those communities. Their drama was integrated with their religion, and both helped them express their sense of belonging to the church and the community.

In some medieval performances, the actors came into the audience, breaking the sense of distance or the illusion of separation. It is difficult for us to know how much participation and involvement in the action the medieval audience felt. Modern audiences have responded very well to productions of medieval plays such as The Second Shepherds’ Pageant, Noah’s Flood, and Everyman, and we have every reason to think that medieval audiences enjoyed their dramas immensely. The guilds that performed them took pride in making their plays as exciting and involving as possible.

The Elizabethan playhouse was a wooden structure providing an enclosed space, approximately seventy-two feet in diameter, around a courtyard open to the sky. A covered stage thrust into the courtyard. As in the Greek theater, the
audience was arranged somewhat by social station. Around the stage, which was about five feet off the ground, stood the groundlings, those who paid the least for their entrance. Then in covered galleries in the building itself sat patrons who paid extra for a seat. The effect of the enclosed structure was of a small, contained world. Actors were in the habit of speaking directly to members of the audience, and the audience rarely kept a polite silence. It was a busy, humming theater that generated intimacy and involvement between actors and audience.

The proscenium stage of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries distanced the audience from the play, providing a clear frame (the proscenium) behind which the performers acted out their scenes. This detachment was especially effective for plays that demanded a high degree of realism because the effect of the proscenium is to make the audience feel that it is witnessing the action as a silent observer, looking in as if through an imaginary fourth wall on a living room or other intimate space in which the action takes place. The proscenium arch gives the illusion that the actors are in a world of their own, unaware of the audience's presence.

In the twentieth century, some of the virtues of the Greek arena theater, or theater in the round, were rediscovered. In an effort to close the distance between audience and players, Antonin Artaud, the French actor and director, developed in the 1920s and 1930s a concept called the theater of cruelty. Using theater in the round, Artaud robbed the audience of the comfort of watching a distant stage and pressed his actors into the space of the viewers. His purpose was to force theatergoers to deal with the primary issues of the drama by stripping them of the security of darkness and anonymity. Theaters in the Soviet Union and Britain developed similar spaces in the 1930s and 1940s, and since the 1950s the Arena Theater in Washington, D.C., and the Circle in the Square in New York City have continued the tradition.

The thrust stage, a modern revision of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre stage, was designed in 1948 by Sir Tyrone Guthrie for the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh, Scotland. He further refined it in the Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario (1957), and in his famous Tyrone Guthrie Theater (1963) in Minneapolis. The audience sits on three sides of a stage that thrusts out from a flat area incorporating balconies, doors, and sometimes stairs. The thrust stage often intensifies the intimacy of the dramatic experience.

Twenty-first-century theater is eclectic. It uses thrust, arena, proscenium, and every other kind of stage already described. Some contemporary site-specific theater also converts nontheatrical space, such as warehouses or city streets, into space for performance.

Reading a Play

Reading a play is a different experience from seeing it enacted. For one thing, readers do not have the benefit of the interpretations made by a director, actors, and scene designers in presenting a performance. These interpretations are all critical judgments based on a director's ideas of how the play should be presented and on actors' insights into the meaning of the play.

A reading of a play produces an interpretation that remains in our heads and is not translated to the stage. The dramatic effect of the staging is lost to us unless we make a genuine effort to visualize it and to understand its contribution to the dramatic experience. For a fuller experience of the drama when reading plays,
one should keep in mind the historical period and the conventions of staging that are appropriate to the period and that are specified by the playwright.

Some plays were prepared by their authors for reading as well as for staging, as evident in plays whose stage directions supply information that would be unavailable to an audience, such as the color of the characters' eyes, characters' secret motives, and other such details. Occasionally, stage directions, such as those of Bernard Shaw and Tennessee Williams, are written in a poetic prose that can be appreciated only by a reader.

It is not a certainty that seeing a play will produce an experience more “true” to the play's meaning than reading it. Every act of reading silently or speaking the lines aloud is an act of interpretation. No one can say which is the best interpretation. Each has its own merits, and the ideal is probably to read and see any play.

Certain historical periods have produced great plays and great playwrights, although why some periods generate more dramatic activity than others is still a matter of conjecture by scholars examining the social, historical, and religious conditions of the times. Each of the great ages of drama has affected the way plays have been written, acted, and staged in successive ages. In every age, drama borrows important elements from each earlier period.

Although scholars disagree in their interpretations of archaeological evidence, it is quite likely that ancient Egyptian drama was highly developed. One of the key artifacts supporting this assertion is an incised stone stela (c. 1868 BCE) describing the roles that an official named Ikhernofret played in a celebration that included characters and dramatic action. The Abydos Passion Play, as some modern scholars call this event, was performed annually from approximately 2,500 to 500 BCE. It is the story of Osiris (the equivalent of the Greek Dionysus), who was murdered in an act of trickery by his jealous brother Seth. Osiris was dismembered (as was Dionysus in Greek myth) and his parts scattered over the land. Isis, both wife and sister of Osiris, gathered most of the parts of Osiris in order to make possible his resurrection. The celebration seems to have been timed to reflect a pattern of agricultural renewal that the rebirth myth of Osiris satisfies. In his account of his role in the event, as recorded on the stela, Ikhernofret says,

I did everything that His Person commanded, putting into effect my lord's command for his father, Osiris-Khentyamentiu, lord of Abydos, great of power, who is in the Thinite nome. I acted as beloved son of Osiris-Khentyamentiu. I embellished his great barque of eternity; I made for it a shrine which displays the beauties of Khentyamentiu, in gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, bronze, sesnedjem-wood and cedar[?]. I fashioned the gods in his train. I made their shrines anew. I caused the temple priesthood to do their duties, I caused them to know the custom of every day, the festival of the Head-of-the-Year. I controlled work on the neshmet-barque; I fashioned the shrine and adorned the breast of the Lord of Abydos with lapis-lazuli and turquois, electrum and every precious stone, as an adornment of the divine limbs. I changed the clothes of the god at his appearance, in the office of Master of Secrets and in my job as sem-priest. I was clean of arm in adoring the god, a sem clean of fingers. I organized the going forth of Wepwawet when he proceeded to avenge his father; I drove away the rebels from the neshmet-barque; I overthrew the enemies of Osiris; I celebrated the great going forth. I followed the god at his going, and
caused the ship to sail, Thoth steering the sailing. I equipped the barque with a chapel and affixed (Osiris's) beautiful adornments when he proceeded to the district of Peqer. I cleared the ways of the god to his tomb before Peqer. I avenged Wennefer that day of the great fight; I overthrew all his enemies upon the sandbanks of Nedyt; I caused him to proceed into the great barque. It raised up his beauties, I making glad the people/tomb owners of the Eastern Desert, creating joy amongst the people/tomb owners of the Western Desert; they saw the beauties of the neshmet-barque when it touched land at Abydos, when it brought Osiris-Khentyamentiu to his palace; I followed the god to his house, I carried out his purification and extended his seat and solved the problems of his residence [. . . and amongst] his entourage.1

Parts of the celebration were public in the outdoors, but parts were also played within the walls of the temple by priests. Little if anything is known about the mysteries they performed, but Herodotus (c. 484–c. 430 BCE), who claimed to have traveled in Egypt, reported seeing public participation in mock battles associated with the celebration.

Another festival, called the Heb-Seb, performed at the pyramid complex of Sakkará in the thirtieth year of a pharaoh's reign (and then every third year following), involved dance, music, and pageantry that closely resembled dramatic action. The purpose of the festival was to celebrate the longevity of the pharaoh and the resultant wellness of the land. The associated “Pyramid Texts” from Sakkará (c. 3000 BCE) also treat the resurrection of Osiris and may imply the existence of an early form of the celebration of Heb-Seb. All these festivals, supplemented by those from Busiris and Memphis in Egypt, suggest that although the Greeks believed they had invented drama, it is much more likely that the Egyptians had done so.

The Greeks of the fifth century BCE are credited with the first masterful dramatic age, which lasted from the birth of Aeschylus (c. 525 BCE) to the death of Aristophanes (c. 385 BCE). Their theaters were supported by public funds, and the playwrights competed for prizes during the great festivals of Dionysus. Sometimes as many as ten to fifteen thousand people sat in the theaters and watched with a sense of delight and awe as the actors played out their tales.

Theater was extremely important to the Greeks as a way of interpreting their relationships with their gods and of reinforcing their sense of community. The fifth-century-BCE audience, mostly wealthy citizens, came early in the morning and spent the entire day in the theater. Drama for the Greeks was not mere escapism or entertainment, not a frill or a luxury. Connected as it was with religious festivals, it was a cultural necessity.

Sophocles’ plays Oedipus Rex and Antigone are examples of the powerful tragedies that have transfixed audiences for centuries. Euripides, slightly younger than Sophocles, was also a prize-winning tragedian. His Trojan Women, Alcestis, Medea, The Bacchae, and Elektra [Electra] are still performed and still exert an influence on today’s drama. The same is true of Aeschylus, who was slightly older than both and whose Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides (known collectively as the Oresteia), and Prometheus Bound have all been among the most lasting of plays.

1From http://www.touregypt.net/passionplay.htm; also in Henry Breasted’s Ancient Records of Egypt, part 2 (1906–07).
In addition to such great tragedians, the Greeks also produced the important comedians Aristophanes and Menander (late fourth century BCE), whose work has been plundered for plays as diverse as a Shakespeare comedy and a Broadway musical. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, in which the Athenian and Spartan women agree to withhold sex from their husbands until the men promise to stop making war, is a sometimes crude social comedy. Menander produced a more refined type of comedy that made the culture laugh at itself. Both styles of comedy are staples of popular entertainment even today. Menander’s comedies were the basis of later social comedy in which society’s ways of behavior are criticized. Such social comedy is exemplified in William Congreve’s eighteenth-century *The Way of the World* and Molière’s *Tartuffe*.

Roman Drama

The Romans became aware of Greek drama in the third century BCE and began to import Greek actors and playwrights. Because of many social and cultural differences between the societies, however, drama never took a central role in the life of the average Roman. Seneca, who is now viewed as Rome’s most important tragedian, almost certainly wrote his plays to be read rather than to be seen onstage.

Roman comedy produced two great playwrights, Plautus and Terence, who helped develop the stock (or type) character, such as the skinflint or the prude. Plautus was the great Roman comedian in the tradition of Menander. Plautus’s best-known plays are *The Braggart Warrior* and *The Twin Menaechmi*; during the Renaissance, when all European schoolchildren read Latin, his works were favorites.

Terence’s work was praised during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as being smoother, more elegant, and more polished and refined than Plautus’s. In his own age, Terence was less admired by the general populace but more admired by connoisseurs of drama. His best-known plays—*The Woman of Andros*, *Phormio*, and *The Brothers*—are rarely performed today.

Drama took its place beside many other forms of entertainment in Roman culture—sports events, gladiator battles to the death, chariot races, the slaughter of wild beasts, and sacrifices of Christians and others to animals. The Roman public, when it did attend plays, enjoyed farces and relatively coarse humor. The audiences for Plautus and Terence, aristocratic in taste, may not have represented the cross-section of the community that was typical of Greek audiences.

Medieval Drama

After the fall of Rome and the spread of the Goths and Visigoths across southern Europe in the fifth century CE, Europe experienced a total breakdown of the strong central government Rome had provided. When Rome fell, Greek and Roman culture virtually disappeared. The great classical texts went largely unread until the end of the medieval period in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; however, expressions of culture, including art forms such as drama, did not entirely disappear. During the medieval period, the power and influence of the Church grew extensively, and it tried to fill the gap left by the demise of the Roman empire. The Church became a focus of both religious and secular activity for people all over Europe.

After almost five centuries of relative inactivity, European drama was re-born in religious ceremonies in monasteries. It moved inside churches, then out of doors by the twelfth century, perhaps because its own demands outgrew its circumstances. Drama had become more than an adjunct to the religious ceremonies that had spawned it.
One reason the medieval European communities regarded their drama so highly is that it expressed many of their concerns and values. The age was highly religious; in addition, the people who produced the plays were members of guilds whose personal pride was represented in their work. Their plays came to be called mystery plays because the trade that each guild represented was a special skill—a mystery to the average person. Of course, the pun on religious mystery was understood by most audiences.

Many of these plays told stories drawn from the Bible. The tales of Noah's Ark, Abraham and Isaac, and Samson and Delilah all had dramatic potential, and the mystery plays capitalized on that potential, as did plays on the life and crucifixion of Christ. Among mystery plays, *The Second Shepherds' Pageant* and *Abraham and Isaac* are still performed regularly.

Most mystery plays were gathered into groups of plays called cycles, dramatizing incidents from the Bible, among other sources. They were usually performed outdoors, at times on movable wagons that doubled as stages. Either the audience moved from wagon to wagon to see each play in a cycle or the wagons moved among the audience.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a form of play developed that was not associated with cycles or with the guilds. These were the morality plays, and their purpose was to touch on larger contemporary issues that had a moral overtone. *Everyman*, the best known of the morality plays, was performed in many nations in various languages.

The revival of learning in the Renaissance, beginning in Italy in the fourteenth century, had considerable effect on drama because classical Greek and Roman plays were discovered and studied. In the academies in Italy, some experiments in re-creating Greek and Roman plays introduced music into drama. New theaters, such as Teatro Olympico in Vicenza (1579), were built to produce these plays; they allow us to see how the Renaissance reconceived the classical stage. Some of these experiments developed into modern opera. The late medieval traditions of the Italian theater's commedia dell'arte, a stylized improvisational slapstick comedy performed by actors' guilds, began to move beyond Italy into other European nations. The commedia's stock characters, Harlequins and Pulcinellas, began to appear in many countries in Europe.

Elizabethan drama and Jacobean drama (named for King James I, who succeeded Elizabeth and reigned from 1603 to 1625) developed most fully during the fifty years from approximately 1590 to 1640. Audiences poured into the playhouses eager for plays about history and for the great tragedies of Christopher Marlowe, such as *Doctor Faustus*, and of Shakespeare, including *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, and *King Lear*. But there were others as well: Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, Cyril Tourneur's *Revenger's Tragedy*, John Webster's *The White Devil* and his sensational *The Duchess of Malfi*.

The great comedies of the age came mostly from the pen of William Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Twelfth Night*. Many of these plays derived from Italian originals, usually novellas or popular poems and sometimes comedies. But Shakespeare, of course, elevated and vastly improved everything he borrowed.

Ben Jonson, a playwright who was significantly influenced by the classical writers, was also well represented on the Elizabethan stage, with *Volpone*,
The Alchemist, Every Man in His Humour, Bartholomew Fair, and other durable comedies. Jonson is also important for his contributions to the masque, an aristocratic entertainment that featured music, dance, and fantastic costuming. His Masque of Blackness was performed in the royal court with the queen as a performer.

The Elizabethan stage sometimes grew bloody, with playwrights and audiences showing a passion for tragedies that, like Hamlet, centered on revenge and often ended with most of the characters meeting a premature death. Elizabethan plays also show considerable variety, with many plays detailing the history of English kings and, therefore, the history of England. It was a theater of powerful effect, and contemporary diaries indicate that the audiences delighted in it.

Throughout the Renaissance, women were not allowed on stage; men and boys played the female roles. Theaters in Shakespeare’s day were built outside city limits in seamy neighborhoods near brothels and bear-baiting pits, where chained bears were set upon by large dogs for the crowd’s amusement. Happily, the theaters’ business was good; the plays were constructed of remarkable language that seems to have fascinated all social classes, since all flocked to the theater by the thousands.

Theaters also flourished in Spain in this period, producing Lope de Vega (1562–1635), who may have written as many as seventeen hundred plays. Vega’s immediate successor, Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681), is sometimes considered to be more polished in style, but also more stiffly aristocratic in appeal. He wrote fewer plays than Vega, but still produced an amazing body of work. He is said to have written at least 111 dramas and seventy or eighty auto sacramentales, the Spanish equivalent of religious morality plays, designed for special religious ceremonies. Calderón is best known for La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream), which is still performed today.

After the Puritan reign in England from 1642 (when the theaters were closed) to 1660, during which dramatic productions were almost nonexistent, the theater was suddenly revived. In 1660, Prince Charles, having been sent to France by his father during the English Civil War, was invited back to be king, thus beginning what was known in England as the Restoration. It was a gay, exciting period, in stark contrast to the gray Puritan era. During the Restoration, new indoor theaters modeled on those in France were built, and a new generation of actors and actresses (women took part in plays for the first time in England) came forth to participate in the dramatic revival.

Since the mid-seventeenth century, French writers, interpreting Aristotle’s description of Greek drama, had leaned toward development of a classical theater, which was supposed to observe the “unities” of time, place, and action: a play had one plot and one setting and covered the action of one day. In 1637, Pierre Corneille wrote Le Cid, using relatively modern Spanish history as his theme and following certain classical techniques. Jean-Baptiste Racine was Corneille’s successor, and his plays became even more classical by focusing on classical topics. His work includes Andromache, Britannicus, and, possibly his best play, Phaedra. Racine retired from the stage at the end of the seventeenth century, but he left a powerful legacy of classicism that reached well into the eighteenth century.
Molière, an actor and producer, was the best comedian of seventeenth-century France. Tartuffe, The Misanthrope, and several of his other plays are still produced regularly. Molière was classical in his way, borrowing ancient comedy's technique of using type, or stock, characters in his social satires.

Among the important English playwrights of the new generation were Aphra Behn, the first female professional writer, whose play The Rover was one of the most popular plays of the late seventeenth century, and William Congreve, whose best-known play, The Way of the World, is still often produced. The latter is a lively comedy that aimed to chasten as well as entertain Congreve's audiences.

The eighteenth century saw the tradition of social comedy continued in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's School for Scandal and Oliver Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer. The drama of this period focuses on social manners, and much of it is satire—that is, drama that offers mild criticism of society and holds society up to comic ridicule. But underlying that ridicule is the relatively noble motive of reforming society. We can see some of that motive at work in the plays of Molière and Goldsmith. We see it even more in John Gay's The Beggar's Opera, the most popular drama of the eighteenth century.

During much of the eighteenth century, theater in France centered on the court and was controlled by a small coterie of snobbish people. The situation in England was not quite the same, although the audiences were snobbish and socially conscious. They went to the theater to be seen, and they often went in claques—groups of like-minded patrons who applauded or booed together to express their views. Theater was important, but attendance at it was like a material possession, something to be displayed for others to admire.

A wide variety of drama was extant in Japan in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Kabuki theater, the most remarkable form of popular Japanese drama and a lasting form still seen today in theaters around the world, evolved in this period. Kabuki is performed with music, and the resulting intensity would have surprised Western playwrights and audiences of that time. The emphasis shifted from the personality of the player to the situations and circumstances portrayed in the drama. Chikamatsu Monzaemon developed the form and was the most inventive of the Kabuki playwrights. His play The Love Suicides at Sonezaki was based on a genuine love suicide (shinju in Japanese) and created a craze for love suicide plays that resulted in an edict in 1722 that banned them entirely. Some modern writers claim that the quality of his drama was not equaled in Japan for more than two hundred years.

English playwrights alone produced more than thirty thousand plays during the nineteenth century. Most of the plays were sentimental, melodramatic, and dominated by a few very powerful actors, stars who often overwhelmed the works written for them. The audiences were quite different from those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The upwardly mobile urban middle classes and the moneyed factory and mill owners who had benefited economically from the industrial revolution demanded a drama that would entertain them.

The audiences were generally not well educated, nor were they interested in plays that were intellectually demanding. Instead, they wanted escapist and sentimental entertainment that was easy to respond to and did not challenge...
their basic values. Revivals of old plays and adaptations of Shakespeare were also common in the age, with great stars like Edmund Kean, Sir Henry Irving, Edwin Forrest, Edwin Booth, and William Macready using the plays as platforms for overwhelming, and sometimes overbearing, performances. Thrillers were especially popular, as were historical plays and melodramatic plays featuring a helpless heroine.

As an antidote to such a diet, the new Realist movement in literature, exemplified by the achievements of French novelists Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert, finally reached the stage in the 1870s and 1880s in plays by August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen. Revolutionizing Western drama, these Scandinavians forced their audiences to confront more important issues and deeper psychological concerns than those facing earlier audiences.

Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, a psychological study, challenged social complacency based on class and social differences. Ibsen's *A Doll House* struck a blow for feminism, but it did not amuse all audiences. Some were horrified at the thought that Nora Helmer was to be taken as seriously as her husband. Such a view was heretical, but it was also thrilling for a newly awakened European conscience. Those intellectuals and writers who responded positively to Ibsen, including Bernard Shaw, acted as the new conscience and began a move that soon transformed drama. Feminism is also a theme, but perhaps less directly, of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, the story of a woman whose frustration at being cast in an inferior role contributes to a destructive—and ultimately self-destructive—impulse. Both plays are acted in a physical setting that seems to be as ordinary as a nineteenth-century sitting room, with characters as small—and yet as large—as the people who watched them.

The Russian Anton Chekhov's plays *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, written at the turn of the twentieth century, are realistic as well, but they are also patient examinations of character, rather than primarily problem plays like Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *The Master Builder*. Chekhov was aware of social change in Russia, especially the changes that revealed a hitherto repressed class of peasants evolving into landowners and merchants. *The Cherry Orchard* is suffused with an overpowering sense of inevitability through which Chekhov depicts the conflict between the necessity for change and a nostalgia for the past. The comedies of Oscar Wilde, such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, poke fun at the foibles of the upper classes. Amusing as these plays are, their satirical quality constitutes social criticism.

These plays introduced a modern realism of a kind that was rare in earlier drama. Melodrama of the nineteenth century was especially satisfying to mass audiences because the good characters were very good, the bad characters were very bad, and justice was meted out at the end. But it is difficult in Chekhov to be sure who the heroes and villains are. Nothing is as clear-cut in these plays as it is in popular melodramas. Instead, Chekhov's plays are as complicated as life itself. Such difficulties of distinction have become the norm of the most important of contemporary drama.

The drama of the early twentieth century nurtured the seeds of late-nineteenth-century realism into bloom, but sometimes this drama experimented with audience expectations. Eugene O'Neil's *Desire under the Elms* is a tragedy that features the ordinary citizen rather than the noble. This play focuses on New
England farmers as tragic characters. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* invokes a sense of dreadful inevitability within the world of the commercial salesman, the ordinary man. As in many other twentieth-century tragedies, the point is that the life of the ordinary man can be as tragic as that of Oedipus.

Luigi Pirandello experiments with reality in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a play that has a distinctly absurd quality, since it expects us to accept the notion that the characters on the stage are waiting for an author to put them into a play. Pirandello plays with our sense of illusion and of expectation and realism to such an extent that he forces us to reexamine our concepts of reality.

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, an example of what the playwright called epic drama, explores war from a complex series of viewpoints. On the one hand, Courage is a powerful figure who has been seen as a model of endurance, but Brecht also wanted his audience to see that Courage brings on much of her own suffering by trying to profit from war. The sole act of self-sacrifice in the play comes at the end, when Kattrin beats her drum to warn villagers of the approach of a destroying army. Brecht produced the play early in World War II as a protest. Playwrights around the world responded to events such as World War I, the Communist revolution, and the Great Depression by writing plays that no longer permitted audiences to sit comfortably and securely in darkened theaters. Brecht and other playwrights instead came out to get their audiences, to make them feel and think, to make them realize their true condition.

Samuel Beckett's dramatic career began with *Waiting for Godot*, which audiences interpreted as an examination of humans' eternal vigilance for the revelation of God or of some transcendent meaning in their lives. In the play, Godot never comes, yet the characters do not give up hope. *Endgame*'s characters seem to be awaiting the end of the world: in the 1950s, the shadow of nuclear extinction cast by the cold war dominated most people's imagination.

Tennessee Williams relied on personal experience in writing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which portrays themes of homosexuality and marital sexual tension—themes that were not discussed in contemporary American theater except in veiled mythic terms, in the manner, for example, of O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*.

Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986, portrays the complex intersection of a person's past and the present in his play *The Strong Breed*, set in an African village reminiscent of the Greek *polis*. He experiments with Greek tragic forms in *The Bacchae of Euripides*, which is also set in Africa. Soyinka's insights into the nature of culture and drama provide us with a new way of reflecting on drama's power in our lives.

Modern dramatists from the turn of the twentieth century to the Korean War explored in many different directions and developed new approaches to themes of dramatic illusion as well as to questions concerning the relationship of an audience to the stage and the players.

The twenty-first-century stage is vibrant. The great commercial theaters of England and the United States are sometimes hampered by high production costs, but regional theaters everywhere are producing fine drama. The National Theatre in London has made inexpensive seats available for most of its plays, and other theaters are doing the same. In Latin America, Germany, Japan,
China, France, and elsewhere, the theater is active and exciting. Poland’s experiments in drama, led by Jerzy Grotowski’s “Poor Theater,” inspired experimentation that has spread throughout the world of drama. Russia, too, has produced a number of plays that have achieved worldwide currency.

The hallmark of many of these plays has been experimentalism. Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* features characters who claim to be Pope Joan, Patient Griselda, and Lady Nijo, as well as being “themselves”—all this in the milieu of a feminist employment agency. Her newer play, *Far Away*, is a portrait of an apocalyptic world as viewed by a girl.

Sam Shepard, well known as an actor, was for many years among the most experimental playwrights living in New York’s Greenwich Village. His *True West* begins as a relatively straightforward play about Austin and Lee, two brothers, but quickly reveals the drama that lies beneath the surface. Lee has arrived to steal his mother’s television set but ends by stealing something of his brother’s personality. *Buried Child* examines some frightening secrets in a dysfunctional family.

Suzan-Lori Parks has made a career of writing experimental plays, from the Brechtian *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, which structures itself in “panels” (brief, intense scenes that connect imaginatively), to 365 *Days/365 Plays*, for which she wrote a play a day for a year. Tony Kushner employs similar techniques in *Angels in America*. Its brilliantly staged scenes are filled with emotional intensity, and the audience is carried on waves of imaginative speculation on America’s history as well as on America’s present. Moises Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project used highly inventive means to produce *The Laramie Project*, a play built around the murder of a young gay man, Matthew Shepherd, in Wyoming. It was a shocking crime both to the nation at large and to the local community in Laramie. The members of the project conducted many interviews with people in Laramie over a period of more than a year, and the resultant drama, largely developed from the interviews, revealed a range of surprising responses and surprising emotions. Experimentation is probably at the heart of the work of many playwrights, although it still does not please mainstream audiences to the same degree that traditional drama does.

Not all modern theater is experimental, however. August Wilson’s *Fences* shows us the pain of life at the lower end of the economic ladder in a form that is recognizably realistic and plausible. The play is set in the 1950s and focuses on Troy Maxson, a black man, and his relationship with his son and his wife. Tenement life is one subject of the play, but the most important subject is the courage it takes to keep going after tasting defeat. The entire drama develops within the bounds of conventional nineteenth-century realism.

The most celebrated of contemporary playwrights seem to mix experimental and conventional dramatic techniques. Tom Stoppard, whose work is cerebral and witty, as in his pastiche of *Hamlet* called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, continues to delve into literature for much of his work. *The Invention of Love* treats the hopeless love of the Oxford classical scholar and poet A. E. Housman for a young athlete, Moses Jackson. The play begins with Housman crossing the river Styx into the underworld. Throughout, the older Housman watches himself as a young man and offers his sentiments. *Arcadia*, unlike some of Stoppard’s early works, is a deeply emotional play about a
thirteen-year-old girl, Lady Thomasina Coverly, gifted mathematically in an age in which such fields of study were reserved for men. The play takes place in one country house in Derbyshire, England, in both 1809 and 1989, contrasting several modes of thought and feeling—classical, romantic, and modern.

Paula Vogel's plays frequently interrupt the dramatic action with asides, but they are also imaginatively structured so that time feels fluid and the action moves in emotionally significant sweeps. *The Baltimore Waltz*, derived from Vogel's experience of watching her brother die of AIDS, brings humor to a tragic situation. Similarly, *How I Learned to Drive*, which sensitively treats the subject of sexual molestation in families, also has comic moments.

Recent Irish playwrights have provided us with a range of powerful plays that invoke horror, joy, and the supernatural. *Faith Healer, Translations, Dancing at Lughnasa*, and *Molly Sweeney* are only some of Brian Friel's celebrated plays. Friel has experimented with using both a single character and a full cast and has used many unusual techniques. For example, in *Translations*, English- and Irish-speaking characters are unable to communicate with one another, although in reality the actors all speak English for the audience. Conor McPherson's *Shining City* includes a bit of supernatural mystery typical of his work; *The Weir* incorporates a ghost story, and *The Seafarer* contains echoes of Irish myth and an appearance by the Devil. Martin McDonagh has had multiple plays running on Broadway and London's West End at the same time. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane, The Lonesome West, The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, and *The Pillowman* have all been nominated for Tony Awards.

Among other contemporary successes that have been produced internationally and in regional theaters are Sarah Ruhl's plays, which have stimulated audiences with their adventurous productions. *The Clean House* features a Brazilian housekeeper who searches for the perfect joke, which she eventually tells in Portuguese. *Eurydice* is a moving interpretation of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, written as a hymn to Ruhl's father, who had died of cancer. *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play*, a Tony Award nominee in 2010, examines late-nineteenth-century treatments of hysteria. Ruhl's satire is based on the assumption by some early psychologists that the vast majority of women's problems could be cured with the vibrator.

Other writers who have made an impact on contemporary theater include John Patrick Shanley, whose *Doubt* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama and the Tony Award for best play in 2005; Yasmina Reza, a French playwright whose plays *Art* and *God of Carnage* won Tony Awards in 1998 and 2009; Tracy Letts, whose *August: Osage County*, a portrait of a highly volatile family, won the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award for best play in 2008; and Lynn Nottage, who followed her plays *Poof!, Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, and *Intimate Apparel* with *Ruined*, a tale set in modern Africa that won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009. The theater of the twenty-first century continues with extraordinary energy to explore issues of social, historical, and psychological importance, using a wide range of techniques to which audiences respond positively.

**Genres of Drama**

Drama since the great age of the Greeks has taken several different forms. As we have seen, tragedies were one genre that pleased Greek audiences, and comedies pleased the Romans. In later ages, a blend of the comic and the tragic
produced a hybrid genre: tragicomedy. In our time, unless a play is modeled on the Greek or Shakespearean tragedies, as is O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, it is usually considered tragicomic rather than tragic. Our age still enjoys the kind of comedy that people laugh at, although most plays that are strictly comedy are frothy, temporarily entertaining, and not lasting.

**Tragedy**

Tragedy demands a specific worldview. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, points out that the tragic hero or heroine should be noble of birth, perhaps a king like Oedipus or a princess like Antigone. This has often been interpreted to mean that the tragic hero or heroine should be more magnanimous, more daring, and larger in spirit than the average person.

Modern tragedies have rediscovered tragic principles, and while O'Neill and Miller rely on Aristotle's precepts, they have shown that in a modern society shorn of the distinctions between noble and peasant, it is possible for audiences to see the greatness in all classes. This insight has given us a new way of orienting ourselves to the concept of fate; to *hamartia*, the wrong act that leads a person to a tragic end; and to the hero's or heroine's relationship to the social order.

Aristotle suggested that plot was the heart and soul of tragedy and that character came second. But most older tragedies take the name of the tragic hero or heroine as their title; this signifies the importance that dramatists invested in their tragic characters. Yet they also heeded Aristotle's stipulation that tragic action should have one plot rather than the double or triple plots that often characterize comedies. (Shakespeare was soundly criticized in the eighteenth century for breaking this rule in his tragedies.) And older tragedies paid attention to the concept of *peripeteia*, which specifies that the progress of the tragic characters sometimes leads them to a reversal: they get what they want, but what they want turns out to be destructive. Aristotle especially valued a plot in which the reversal takes place simultaneously with the recognition of the truth, or the shift from ignorance to awareness, as it does in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

Playwrights in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France were especially interested in following classical precepts. They were certain that Greek tragedy and Roman comedy were the epitome of excellence in drama. They interpreted Aristotle's discussion of dramatic integrity as a set of rules governing dramatic form. These became known as drama's *three unities*, specifying one plot, a single action that takes place in one day, and a single setting. The neoclassical reinterpretation of the unities was probably much stricter than Aristotle intended.

**Comedy**

Two kinds of comedy developed among the ancient Greeks: *Old Comedy*, which resembles farce (light drama characterized by broad satirical comedy and an improbable plot) and often pokes fun at individuals with social and political power, and *New Comedy*, which is a more refined commentary on the condition of society.

Old Comedy survives in the masterful works of Aristophanes, such as *Lysistrata*, while New Comedy hearkens back to the lost plays of Menander and resurfaces in plays such as Molière's *Tartuffe*. Molière uses humor but mixes it with a serious level of social commentary. Modern comedy of *manners* studies and sometimes ridicules modern society, as in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. 
Comedy is not always funny. Chekhov thought The Cherry Orchard was a comedy, whereas his producer, the great Constantin Stanislavski, who trained actors to interpret Chekhov’s lines and who acted in other Chekhov plays, thought it was a tragedy. The argument may have centered on the ultimate effect of the play on its audiences, but it may also have centered on the question of laughter. There are laughs in The Cherry Orchard, but they usually come at the expense of a character or a social group. This is true, as well, of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot and Krapp’s Last Tape. We may laugh, but we know that the play is at heart very serious.

Since the early seventeenth century, serious plays have been called tragicom- edies when they do not adhere strictly to the structure of tragedy, which emphasizes the nobility of the hero or heroine, fate, the wrong action of the hero or heroine, and a resolution that includes death, exile, or a similar end. Many serious plays have these qualities, but they also have some of the qualities of comedy: a commentary on society, raucous behavior that draws laughs, and a relatively happy ending. Yet their darkness is such that we can hardly feel comfortable regarding them as comedies.

Plays such as Sam Shepard’s Buried Child and Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun can be considered tragicomedy. Indeed, the modern temperament has especially relied on the mixture of comic and tragic elements for its most serious plays. Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill, Yasmina Reza, Sarah Ruhl, and Tracy Letts have all been masters of tragicomedy.

In contemporary drama, tragicomedy takes several forms. One is the play whose seriousness is relieved by comic moments; another is the play whose comic structure absorbs a tragic moment and continues to express affirmation. Yet another is the dark comedy whose sardonic humor leaves us wondering how we can laugh at something that is ultimately frightening. This is the case with some absurdist comedies, which insist that there is no meaning in events other than the meaning we invent for ourselves. Pinter’s The Homecoming and Beckett’s Endgame are such plays. They are funny yet sardonic, and when we laugh we do so uneasily.

Other genres of drama exist, although they are generally versions of tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy. Improvisational theater, in which actors use no scripts and may switch roles at any moment, defies generic description. Musical comedies and operas are dramatic entertainments that have established their own genres related in some ways to the standard genres of drama.

Genre distinctions are useful primarily because they establish expectations in the minds of audiences with theatrical experience. Tragedies and comedies make different demands on an audience. According to Marsha Norman’s explanation of the “rules” of drama, you have to know in a play just what is at stake. Understanding the principles that have developed over the centuries to create the genres of drama helps us know what is at stake.

All plays share some basic elements with which playwrights and producers work: plots, characters, settings, dialogue, movement, and themes. In addition, many modern plays pay close attention to lighting, costuming, music, and
Plot

Plot is a term for the action of a drama. Plot implies that the action has a shape and form that will ultimately prove satisfying to the audience. Generally, a carefully plotted play begins with exposition, an explanation of what happened before the play began and of how the characters arrived at their present situation. The play continues, using suspense to build tension in the audience and in the characters and to develop further the pattern of rising action. The audience wonders what is going to happen, sees the characters set in motion, and then watches as certain questions implied by the drama are answered one by one. The action achieves its greatest tension as it moves to a point of climax, when a revelation is experienced, usually by the chief characters. Once the climax has been reached, the plot continues, sometimes very briefly, in a pattern of falling action as the drama reaches its conclusion and the characters understand their circumstances and themselves better than they did at the beginning of the play.

The function of plot is to give action a form that helps us understand elements of the drama in relation to one another. Plays can have several interrelated plots or only one. Lady Gregory's The Rising of the Moon has one very simple plot: a police sergeant is sent out with two policemen to make sure a political rebel does not escape from the area. The effect of the single plot is that the entire play focuses intensely on the interaction between the rebel, disguised as a ballad singer, and the sergeant. The sergeant meets the rebel, listens to him sing ballads, and then recognizes in him certain qualities they share. The audience wonders whether a reward of one hundred pounds will encourage the sergeant to arrest the ballad singer or, instead, the ballad singer's sense that his cause is just will persuade the sergeant to let him go. The climax of the action occurs when the sergeant's two policemen return and, as the ballad singer hides behind a barrel, ask whether the sergeant has seen any signs of the rebel. Not until that moment does the audience know for sure what the sergeant will do. When he gives his answer, the falling action begins.

Plots depend on conflict between characters, and in The Rising of the Moon the conflict is very deep. It is built into the characters themselves, but it is also part of the institution of law that the sergeant serves and the ongoing struggle for justice that the ballad singer serves. This conflict, still evident today, was a very significant national issue in Ireland when the play was first produced in Dublin in 1907.

Lady Gregory works subtly with the conflict between the sergeant and the ballad singer, showing that although they are on completely opposite sides of the law—and of the important political issues—they are more alike than they are different. The ballad singer begins to sing the "Granaile," a revolutionary
song about England’s unlawful dominance over Ireland through seven centuries; when he leaves out a line, the sergeant supplies it. In that action the sergeant reveals that even though he is paid by the English to keep law and order, his roots lie with the Irish people. By his knowledge of the revolutionary songs he reveals his sympathies.

Lady Gregory has effectively joined character and conflict in *The Rising of the Moon*: as the conflict is revealed, the characters of the sergeant and the ballad singer are also revealed. At first the sergeant seems eager to get the reward, and he acts bossy with Policeman X and Policeman B. And when he first meets the ballad singer, he seems demanding and policemanlike. It is only when he begins to sense who the ballad singer really is that he changes and reveals a deep, sympathetic streak.

Lady Gregory, in a note to the play, said that in Ireland when the play was first produced, those who wanted Ireland to become part of England were incensed to see a policeman portrayed so as to show his sympathies with rebels. Those who wished Ireland to become a separate nation from England were equally shocked to see a policeman portrayed so sympathetically.

The sergeant and the ballad singer are both major characters in the play, but it is not clear that either is the villain or the hero. When the play begins, the sergeant seems to be the hero because he represents the law, and the ballad singer appears to be the villain because he has escaped from prison. But as the action develops, those characterizations change. What replaces them is an awareness of the complications that underlie the relationship between the law and the lawbreaker in some circumstances. This is part of the point of Lady Gregory’s play.

Lady Gregory has given a very detailed portrait of both main characters, although in a one-act play she does not have enough space to be absolutely thorough in developing them. Yet we get an understanding of the personal ambitions of each character, and we understand both their relationship to Ireland and their particular allegiances as individuals. They speak with each other in enough detail to show that they understand each other, and when the ballad singer hides behind the barrel at the approach of the other two policemen, he indicates that he trusts the sergeant not to reveal him.

Policeman X and Policeman B are only sketched in. Yet their presence is important. It is with them that the sergeant reveals his official personality, and it is their presence at the end that represents the most important threat to the security of the ballad singer. We know, though, little or nothing about them personally. They are functionaries, a little like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*, but without the differentiating characterizations that Shakespeare was able to give minor players in his full-length play.

The plays collected in this book have some of the most remarkable characters ever created in literature. Tragedy usually demands complex characters, such as Oedipus, Antigone, Medea, Hamlet, and Willy Loman. We come to know them through their own words, through their interaction with other characters, through their expression of feelings, through their decisions, and through their presence onstage depicted in movement and gesture.

Tragicomedies offer individualized and complex characters, such as Madame Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*, Miss Julie in Strindberg’s play
by that name, and Nora Helmer in *A Doll House*. But just as effective in certain kinds of drama are characters drawn as types, such as Alceste, the misanthrope in Molière’s play, and Everyman in medieval drama.

In many plays we see that the entire shape of the action derives from the characters, from their strengths and weaknesses. In such plays we do not feel that the action lies outside the characters and that they must live through an arbitrary sequence of events. Instead we believe that they create their own opportunities and problems.

The *setting* of a play includes many things. First, this term refers to the time and place in which the action occurs. Second, it refers to the scenery, the physical elements that appear onstage to vivify the author’s stage directions. In Lady Gregory’s play, we have a dock with barrels to suggest the locale, and darkness suggests night. These are important details that influence the emotional reaction of the audience.

Some plays make use of very elaborate settings; for example, August Wilson’s *Fences* is produced with a detailed tenement backyard onstage. Others make use of simple settings, such as the empty stage of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

Lady Gregory’s setting derives from her inspiration for the play. She visited the quays — places where boats dock and leave with goods — as a young girl and imagined how someone might escape from the nearby prison and make his getaway “under a load of kelp” in one of the ships. The quay represents the meeting of the land and water, and it represents the getaway, the possibility of freedom. The barrel is a symbol of trade, and the sergeant and the ballad singer sit on its top and trade the words of a revolutionary song with each other.

The title of the play refers to another element of the setting: the moonlight. The night protects the ballad singer, and it permits the sergeant to bend his sworn principles a bit. The rising of the moon, as a rebel song suggests, signifies a change in society, the time when “the small shall rise up and the big shall fall down.” Lady Gregory uses these elements in the play in a very effective way, interrelating them so that their significance becomes increasingly apparent as the play progresses.

Plays depend for their unfolding on dialogue. The *dialogue* is the verbal exchanges between the characters. Since there is no description or commentary on the action, as there is in most novels, the dialogue must tell the whole story. Fine playwrights have developed ways of revealing character, advancing action, and introducing themes by a highly efficient use of dialogue.

Dialogue is spoken by one character to another, who then responds. But sometimes, as in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a character delivers a *soliloquy*, in which he or she speaks onstage to him- or herself. Ordinarily, such speeches take on importance because they are thought to be especially true. Characters, when they speak to each other, may well wish to deceive, but generally, when they speak to themselves, they have no reason to say anything but the truth.

In *The Rising of the Moon*, Lady Gregory has written an unusual form of dialogue that reveals a regional way of speaking. Lady Gregory was Anglo-Irish, but she lived in the west of Ireland and was familiar with the speech
patterns that the characters in this play would have used. She has been recognized for her ability to re-create the speech of the rural Irish, and passages such as the following are meant to reveal the peculiarities of the rhythms and syntax of English as it was spoken in Ireland at the turn of the century:

SERGEANT: Is he as bad as that?
MAN: He is then.
SERGEANT: Do you tell me so?

Lady Gregory makes a considerable effort to create dialogue that is rich in local color as well as in spirit. John Millington Synge, another Irish playwright, whose dialogue in *Riders to the Sea* is also an effort to re-create the sounds and rhythms of rural Irish speech, once said, “In a good play every speech should be as fully flavored as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry.” Lady Gregory, who produced Synge’s plays at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, would certainly agree, as her dialogue in *The Rising of the Moon* amply shows.

Lady Gregory introduces another dramatic element: music. In *The Rising of the Moon*, the music is integral to the plot because it allows the ballad singer, by omitting a line of a rebel song, gradually to expose the sergeant’s sympathies with the rebel cause. The sergeant is at first mindful of his duty and insists that the balladeer stop, but eventually he is captivated by the music. As the ballad singer continues, he sings a song containing the title of the play, and the audience or reader realizes that the title exposes the play’s rebel sympathies.

Incidental music is present in a great many of Shakespeare’s plays. His songs are often cited for their particular excellence. Ophelia’s song in act IV of *Hamlet* is deeply touching as a revelation of her mental disturbance. The song moves Laertes, who says, “Do you see this, O God?,” and the audience, too, is moved. In the last act of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare includes both music and dance to intensify the celebration of young lovers. The most frequently produced play of the eighteenth century, John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, used sixty-nine popular ballad tunes to punctuate the action. The *melo* in *melodrama* signals music, and nineteenth-century melodramas often began and ended with musical interludes.

We as readers or witnesses are energized by the movement of the characters in a play. As we read, stage directions inform us where the characters are, when they move, how they move, and perhaps even what the significance of their movement is. In modern plays, the author may give many directions for the action; in earlier plays, stage directions are few and often supplemented by those of a modern editor. In performance, the movements that you see may well have been invented by the director, although the text of a play often requires certain actions, as in the ghost scene and the final dueling scene in *Hamlet*. In some kinds of drama, such as musical comedy and Greek drama, part of the action may be danced.

Lady Gregory moves the ballad singer and the sergeant in telling ways. They move physically closer to each other as they become closer in their thinking. Their movement seems to pivot around the barrel, and in one of the most charming moments of the play, their eyes meet when the ballad singer sits on
Theme

The theme of a play is its message, its central concerns—in short, what the play is about. It is by no means a simple thing to decide what the theme of a play is, and many plays contain several themes rather than a single one. Often, the search for a theme tempts us to oversimplify, reducing a complex play to a relatively simple catchphrase.

Sophocles’ Antigone focuses on the conflict between human law and the law of the gods when following both sets of laws seems to be impossible. Antigone wishes to honor the gods by burying her brother, but the law of Kreon decrees that he shall have no burial, since he is technically a traitor to the state. Similar themes are present in other Greek plays. Hamlet has many themes. On a very elementary level, the main theme of Hamlet is revenge. This is played out in the obligation of a son to avenge the murder of a father, even when the murderer is a kinsman. Another theme centers on corruption in the state of Denmark.

Lady Gregory’s play has revolution as one theme. The rising of the moon is a sign for “the rising,” or revolution, of the people against their English oppressors. The sergeant is an especially English emblem of oppression because the police were established by an Englishman, Robert Peele. At one point, the balladeer suggests the song “The Peeler and the Goat,” but rejects it because in slang a “peeler” is a policeman.

Another important theme in The Rising of the Moon is that of unity among the Irish people. The sergeant seems to be at an opposite pole from the ballad singer when the play opens. He is posting signs announcing a reward that he could well use, since he is a family man. But as the play proceeds, the sergeant moves closer in thought to the Irish people, represented by the rebel, the ballad singer.

If concerned that readers and viewers will miss their thematic intentions, playwrights sometimes reveal these in one or two speeches. Usually, a careful reader or viewer has already divined the theme, and the speeches are intrusive. But Lady Gregory is able to introduce thematic material in certain moments of dialogue, as in this comment by the sergeant, revealing that the police are necessary to prevent a revolution:

SERGEANT: Well, we have to do our duty in the force. Haven’t we the whole country depending on us to keep law and order? It’s those that are down would be up and those that are up would be down, if it wasn’t for us.

For the most part, the thematic material in The Rising of the Moon is spread evenly throughout, as is the case in most good plays.

In every play, the elements of drama will work differently, sometimes giving us the feeling that character is dominant over theme, or plot over character, or setting over both. Ordinarily, critics believe that character, plot, and theme are the most important elements of drama, while setting, dialogue, music, and movement come next. But in the best of dramas each has its importance and each balances the others. The plays in this collection strive for that harmony and achieve it memorably.
Lady Gregory

Isabella Augusta Persse (1852–1932) was born in the west of Ireland. Her family was known as “ascendancy stock”—that is, they were educated, wealthy, and Protestant, living in a land that was largely uneducated, poverty-ridden, and Roman Catholic. A gulf existed between the rich ascendancy families, who lived in great houses with considerable style, partaking in lavish hunts and balls, and the impoverished Irish, who lived in one-room straw-roofed homes and worked the soil with primitive tools.

Lady Gregory took a strong interest in the Irish language, stimulated in part by a nurse who often spoke the language to her when she was a child. Her nurse was an important source of Irish folklore and a contact with the people who lived in the modest cottages around her family estate. It was extraordinary for any wealthy Protestant to pay attention to the language or the life of the poor laborers of the west of Ireland. Yet these are the people who figure most prominently in the plays that Lady Gregory wrote in later life.

Isabella Persse met Sir William Gregory when she was on a family trip to Nice and Rome. They were actually neighbors in Ireland but only slightly acquainted. He was also of Irish ascendancy stock and had been governor of Ceylon. They were married a year after they met, when she was twenty-eight and he was sixty-three. Their marriage was apparently quite successful, and in 1881 their son, Robert Gregory, was born. They used the family home, Coole Park, as a retreat for short periods, but most of their time was spent traveling and living in London, where Sir William was a trustee of the National Gallery of Art. W. B. Yeats, Bernard Shaw, and numerous other important literary figures spent time in Coole Park and its beautiful great house in the early part of the twentieth century.

Lady Gregory led a relatively conventional life until Sir William Gregory died in 1892. According to the laws of that time, the estate passed to her son, so she anticipated a life of relatively modest circumstances. In the process of finishing Sir William’s memoirs, she found herself to be a gifted writer. She used some of her spare time to learn Irish well enough to talk with the old cottagers in the hills, where she went to gather folklore and old songs. Although W. B. Yeats and others had collected volumes of Irish stories and poems, they did not know Irish well enough to authenticate what they heard. Lady Gregory published her Kiltartan tales (she had dubbed her neighborhood Kiltartan) as a way of preserving the rapidly disappearing myths and stories that were still told around the hearth as a matter of course in rural Ireland.

She was already an accomplished writer when she met W. B. Yeats in 1894. Their meeting was of immense importance for the history of drama, since they decided to marshal their complementary talents and abilities to create an Irish theater. Their discussions included certain Irish neighbors, among them Edward Martyn, a Catholic whose early plays had been very successful. They also talked with Dr. Douglas Hyde, a mythographer and linguist and the first president of modern Ireland. Another neighbor who took part, the flamboyant George Moore, was a well-established novelist and playwright.

The group’s first plays—Yeats’s The Countess Cathleen and Martyn’s The Heather Field—were performed on May 8 and 9, 1899, under the auspices of the newly formed Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin at the Ancient Concert
Rooms. Dedicated to producing plays by Irish playwrights on Irish themes, the Irish Literary Theatre became an immediate success. The greatest problem the founders faced was finding more plays. Lady Gregory tried her own hand and became, at age fifty, a playwright.

Her ear for people’s speech was unusually good — good enough that she was able to give the great poet Yeats lessons in dialogue and to help him prepare his own plays for the stage. She collaborated with Yeats on The Pot of Broth in 1902, the year she wrote her first plays, The Jackdaw and A Losing Game. Her first produced play, Twenty-Five, was put on in 1903. By 1904, the group had rented the historic Abbey Theatre. Some of her plays were quite popular and were successful even in later revivals: Spreading the News (1904); Kincora and The White Cockade (1905); and Hyacinth Halvey, The Doctor in Spite of Himself, The Gaol Gate, and The Canavans (all 1906). The next year, there were troubles at the Abbey over John Millington Synge’s Playboy of the Western World. The middle-class audience resented the portrait of Irish peasants as people who would celebrate a self-confessed father-killer, even though he had not actually done the “gallous deed.” Lady Gregory faced down rioting audience members who were protesting what she was convinced was excellent drama.

In 1918, her son, a World War I pilot, was shot down over Italy. The years that followed were to some extent years of struggle. Lady Gregory managed the Abbey Theatre, directed its affairs, and developed new playwrights, among them Sean O’Casey. During the Irish Civil War (1920–1922), she was physically threatened, and eventually her family home, Roxborough, was burned. In 1926, after discovering that she had cancer, she made arrangements to sell Coole Park to the government with the agreement that she could remain there for life. She died in 1932, the writer of a large number of satisfying plays and the prime mover in developing one of the twentieth century’s most important literary theaters.

The Rising of the Moon

One of Lady Gregory’s shortest but most popular plays, The Rising of the Moon is openly political in its themes. Lady Gregory had been writing plays only a short time, and she was directing the Abbey Theatre Company when it produced this play in 1907. Her interest in Irish politics developed, she said, when she was going through the papers of a distant relative of her husband. That man had been in the Castle, the offices of the English authorities given the task of ruling Ireland from Dublin. She said that the underhanded dealings revealed in those papers persuaded her that Ireland would need to be a nation apart from England if justice were ever to be done.

In 1907, the question of union with England or separation and nationhood was on everyone’s lips. Ireland was calm, and people in Dublin were relatively prosperous and by no means readying for a fight or a revolution. Yet there had been a tradition of risings against the English dating back to the Elizabethan age and earlier. In 1907, the average Irish person believed that revolution was a thing of the past; actually, it was less than ten years in the future. Certain organizations, notably the widespread Gaelic League and the less-known Sinn Féin (We Ourselves), had been developing to promote Irish lore, language, and culture. English was the dominant language in Ireland, since it was the language
of commerce, but its use tended to obliterate the Irish culture. Lady Gregory's work with the Abbey Theatre, which was making one of the age's most important contributions to Irish culture, thus coincided with growing interest throughout Ireland in rediscovering its literary past.

The title *The Rising of the Moon* comes from a popular old rebel song that pointed to the rising of the moon as the signal for the rising of peoples against oppression. The main characters of the play represent the two opposing forces in Ireland: freedom and independence, personified by the ballad singer ("a Ragged Man"), and law and order, represented by the sergeant. The ballad singer is aligned with those who want to change the social structure of Ireland so that the people now on the bottom will be on top. The sergeant's job is to preserve the status quo and avoid such a turning of the tables.

In an important way, the sergeant and the ballad singer represent the two alternatives that face the modern Irish—now as in the past. One alternative is to accept the power of the English and be in their pay, like the sergeant; such a person would be well fed and capable of supporting a family. The other alternative is to follow the revolutionary path of the ballad singer and risk prison, scorn, and impoverishment. The ballad singer is a ragged man because he has been totally reduced in circumstances by his political choices.

For Lady Gregory, this play was a serious political statement. She and W. B. Yeats—both aristocratic Protestant Irish—were sympathetic to Irish revolutionary causes. They each wrote plays that struck a revolutionary note during this period. Neither truly expected a revolution; when the Easter Uprising of 1916 was put down with considerable loss of life, Yeats lamented that his plays may have sent some young men to their deaths.

The success of *The Rising of the Moon* lies in Lady Gregory's exceptional ear for dialogue. She captures the way people speak, and she also manages to draw the characters of the sergeant and the ballad singer so as to gain our sympathies for both. In a remarkably economic fashion, she dramatizes the problem of politics in Ireland, characterizing the two polarities and revealing some of the complexities that face anyone who tries to understand them.

**LADY GREGORY (1852–1932)**

**The Rising of the Moon** 1907

<table>
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<td>SERGEANT</td>
<td>POLICEMAN B</td>
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<td>POLICEMAN X</td>
<td>A RAGGED MAN</td>
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(Sergeant, who is older than the others, crosses the stage to right and looks down steps. The others put down a pastepot and unroll a bundle of placards.)

POLICEMAN B: I think this would be a good place to put up a notice. *(He points to barrel.)*

POLICEMAN X: Better ask him. *(Calls to Sergeant.)* Will this be a good place for a placard?

(No answer.)

POLICEMAN B: Will we put up a notice here on the barrel?

(No answer.)
SERGEANT: There's a flight of steps here that leads to the water. This is a place that should be minded well. If he got down here, his friends might have a boat to meet him; they might send it in here from outside.

POLICEMAN B: Would the barrel be a good place to put a notice up?

SERGEANT: It might; you can put it there.

(POLICEMAN B picks the barrel and walks up and puts it down on the steps.)

SERGEANT: I'll mind this place myself. I wouldn't wonder at all if he came this way. He might come slipping along there (points to side of quay), and his friends might be waiting for him there (points down steps), and once he got away it's little chance we'd have of finding him; it's maybe under a load of kelp he'd be in a fishing boat, and not one to help a married man that wants it to the reward.

POLICEMAN X: And if we get him himself, nothing but abuse on our heads for it from the people, and maybe from our own relations.

SERGEANT: Well, we have to do our duty in the force. Haven't we the whole country depending on us to keep law and order? It's those that are down who would be up and those that are up would be down, if it wasn't for us. Well, hurry on, you have plenty of other places to placard yet, and come back here then to me. You can take the lantern. Don't be too long now. It's very dark here with nothing but the moon.

(POLICEMAN B): A hundred pounds is little enough for the Government to offer for him. You may be sure any man in the force that takes him will get promotion.

SERGEANT: I'll mind this place myself, I wouldn't wonder at all if he came this way. He might come slipping along there (points to side of quay), and his friends might be waiting for him there (points down steps), and once he got away it's little chance we'd have of finding him; it's maybe under a load of kelp he'd be in a fishing boat, and not one to help a married man that wants it to the reward.

POLICEMAN B: It's a pity we can't stop with you. The Government should have brought more police into the town, with them in jail, and at assize time too. Well, I'll just sit on the top of the steps till I see will some sailor buy a ballad off me that would give me my supper. They do be late going back to the ship. It's often I saw them in Cork carried down the quay in a handcart.

SERGEANT: Move on, I tell you. I won't have anyone lingering about the quay tonight.

MAN: Well, I'll go. It's the poor have the hard life! Maybe yourself might like one, sergeant. Here's a good sheet now. (Turns one over.) "Content and a pipe"—that's not much. "The Peeler and the goat"—you wouldn't like that. "Johnny Hart"—that's a lovely song.

SERGEANT: Move on.

MAN: Ah, wait till you hear it. (Sings.)

There was a rich farmer's daughter lived near the town of Ross;
She courted a Highland soldier, his name was Johnny Hart;
Says the mother to her daughter, "I'll go distracted mad
If you marry that Highland soldier dressed up in Highland plaid."

SERGEANT: Stop that noise.

(MAN wraps up his ballads and shuffles toward the steps.)

SERGEANT: Where are you going?

MAN: I'm a poor ballad-singer, your honor. I thought to sell some of these (holds out bundle of ballads) to the sailors. (He goes on.)

SERGEANT: Stop! Didn't I tell you to stop? You can't go on there.

MAN: Oh, very well. It's a hard thing to be poor. All the world's against the poor!

SERGEANT: Who are you?

MAN: You'd be as wise as myself if I told you, but I don't mind. I'm one Jimmy Walsh, a ballad-singer.

SERGEANT: Jimmy Walsh? I don't know that name.

MAN: Ah, sure, they know it well enough in Ennis. Were you ever in Ennis, sergeant?

SERGEANT: What brought you here?

MAN: Sure, it's to the assizes I came, thinking I might make a few shillings here or there. It's in the one train with the judges I came.

SERGEANT: Well, if you came so far, you may as well go farther, for you'll walk out of this.

MAN: I will, I will; I'll just go on where I was going. (Goes toward steps.)

SERGEANT: Come back from those steps; no one has leave to pass down them tonight.

MAN: I'll just sit on the top of the steps till I see will some sailor buy a ballad off me that would give me my supper. They do be late going back to the ship. It's often I saw them in Cork carried down the quay in a handcart.

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Says the mother to her daughter, "I'll go distracted mad
If you marry that Highland soldier dressed up in Highland plaid."

SERGEANT: Stop that noise.

(MAN wraps up his ballads and shuffles toward the steps.)

SERGEANT: Where are you going?

MAN: Sure you told me to be going, and I am going.

SERGEANT: Don't be a fool. I didn't tell you to go that way; I told you to go back to the town.

MAN: Back to the town, is it?
SERGEANT: (taking him by the shoulder and shoving him before him): Here, I'll show you the way. Be off with you. What are you stopping for?

MAN (who has been keeping his eye on the notice, points to it): I think I know what you're waiting for, sergeant.

SERGEANT: What's that to you?

MAN: And I know well the man you're waiting for—I know him well—I'll be going.

(He shuffles on.)

SERGEANT: You know him? Come back here. What sort is he?

MAN: Come back is it, sergeant? Do you want to have me killed?

SERGEANT: Why do you say that?

MAN: Never mind. I'm going. I wouldn't be in your shoes if the reward was ten times as much. (Goes on off stage to left.) Not if it was ten times as much.

SERGEANT (rushing after him): Come back here, come back. (Drag him back.) What sort is he? Where did you see him?

MAN: I saw him in my own place, in the County Clare. I tell you you wouldn't like to be looking at him. You'd be afraid to be in the one place with him. There isn't a weapon he doesn't know the use of, and as to strength, his muscles are as hard as that board (slaps barrel).

SERGEANT: Is he as bad as that?

MAN: He is then.

SERGEANT: Do you tell me so?

MAN: There was a poor man in our place, a sergeant from Ballyvaughan.—It was with a lump of stone he did it.

SERGEANT: I never heard of that.

MAN: And you wouldn't, sergeant. It's not everything that happens gets into the papers. And there was a policeman in plain clothes, too.... It is in Limerick he was.... It was after the time of the attack on the police barracks at Kilmallock.... Moonlight.... just like this.... waterside.... Nothing was known for certain.

SERGEANT: Do you say so? It's a terrible county to belong to.

MAN: That's so, indeed! You might be standing there, looking out that way, thinking you saw him coming up this side of the quay (points), and he might be coming up this other side (points), and he'd be on you before you knew where you were.

SERGEANT: It's a whole troop of police they ought to put here to stop a man like that.

MAN: But if you'd like me to stop with you, I could be looking down this side. I could be sitting up here on this barrel.

SERGEANT: And you know him well, too?

MAN: I'd know him a mile off, sergeant.

SERGEANT: But you wouldn't want to share the reward?

MAN: Is it a poor man like me, that has to be going the roads and singing in fairs, to have the name on him that he took a reward? But you don't want me. I'll be safer in the town.

SERGEANT: Well, you can stop.

MAN (getting up on barrel): All right, sergeant. I wonder, now, you're not tired out, sergeant, walking up and down the way you are.

SERGEANT: If I'm tired I'm used to it.

MAN: You might have hard work before you tonight yet. Take it easy while you can. There's plenty of room up here on the barrel, and you see farther when you're higher up.

SERGEANT: Maybe so. (Gets up beside him on barrel, facing right. They sit back to back, looking different ways.) You made me feel a bit queer with the way you talked.

MAN: Give me a match, sergeant (be gives it and man lights pipe); take a draw yourself! It'll quiet you. Wait now till I give you a light, but you needn't turn round. Don't take your eye off the quay for the life of you.

SERGEANT: Never fear, I won't. (Lights pipe. They both smoke.) Indeed it's a hard thing to be in the force, out at night and no thanks for it, for all the danger we're in. And it's little we get but abuse from the people, and no choice but to obey our orders, and never asked when a man is sent into danger, if you are a married man with a family.

MAN (sings): As through the hills I walked to view the hills and shamrock plain, I stood awhile where nature smiles to view the rocks and streams, On a matron fair I fixed my eyes beneath a fertile vale, And she sang her song it was on the wrong of poor old Granuaile.

SERGEANT: Stop that; that's no song to be singing in these times.

MAN: Ah, sergeant, I was only singing to keep my heart up. It sinks when I think of him. To think of us two sitting here, and he creeping up the quay, maybe, to get to us.

SERGEANT: Are you keeping a good lookout?

MAN: I am; and for no reward too. A'mn't I the foolish man? But when I saw a man in trouble, I never could help trying to get him out of it. What's that? Did something hit me?

(Rubs his heart.)

SERGEANT (putting him on the shoulder): You will get your reward in heaven.

MAN: I know that, I know that, sergeant, but life is precious.

SERGEANT: Well, you can sing if it gives you more courage.

MAN (sings): Her head was bare, her hands and feet with iron bands were bound, Her pensive strain and plaintive wail mingles with the evening gale, And the song she sang with mournful air, I am old Granuaile. Her lips so sweet that monarchs kissed...
SERGEANT: That's not it. . . . "Her gown she wore was stained with gore." . . . That's it—you missed that.
MAN: You're right, sergeant, so it is; I missed it. (Repeats line.) But to think of a man like you knowing a song like that.
SERGEANT: There's many a thing a man might know and might not have any wish for.
MAN: Now, I daresay, sergeant, in your youth, you used to be sitting up on a wall, the way you are sitting up on this barrel now, and the other lads beside you, and you singing "Granuaile"? . . .
SERGEANT: I did then.
MAN: And the "Shan Van Vocht"? . . .
SERGEANT: I did then.
MAN: And the "Green on the Cape"?
SERGEANT: That was one of them.
MAN: And maybe the man you are watching for tonight used to be sitting on the wall, when he was young, and singing those same songs. . . . It's a queer world. . . .
SERGEANT: Whish! . . . I think I see something coming. . . . It's only a dog.
MAN: And isn't it a queer world? . . . Maybe it's one of the boys you used to be singing with that time you will be arresting today or tomorrow, and sending into the dock. . . .
SERGEANT: That's true indeed.
MAN: And maybe one night, after you had been singing, if the other boys had told you some plan they had, some plan to free the country, you might have joined with them. . . . and maybe it is you might be in trouble now.
SERGEANT: Well, who knows but I might? I had a great spirit in those days.
MAN: It's a queer world, sergeant, and it's little any mother knows when she sees her child creeping on the floor what might happen to it before it has gone through its life, or who will be who in the end.
SERGEANT: It's nothing, sergeant. I had a great spirit in those days.
MAN: It's a pity, it's a pity! . . . Who are you? You are no ballad-singer.
SERGEANT: It's a signal. (Stands between him and steps.) You must not pass this way. . . . Step farther back. . . . Who are you? You are no ballad-singer.
MAN: You needn't ask who I am; that placard will tell you. (Points to placard.)
SERGEANT: You are the man I am looking for.
MAN: There's a hundred pounds on my head. There is a friend of mine below in a boat. He knows a safe place to bring me to.
SERGEANT: (looking still at hat and wig): It's a pity! It's a pity! You deceived me. You deceived me well.
MAN: I am a friend of Granuaile. There is a hundred pounds on my head.
SERGEANT: That's a signal. (Stands between him and steps.) You must not pass this way. . . . Step farther back. . . . Who are you? You are no ballad-singer.
MAN: You needn't ask who I am; that placard will tell you. (Points to placard.)
SERGEANT: You are the man I am looking for.
MAN: (takes off hat and wig. Sergeant seizes them): I am a friend of Granuaile. There is a hundred pounds on my head.
MAN: (after a pause): What is that?
SERGEANT: That was the last of the placards. (Slips behind barrel.) No one at all.
MAN: (sings louder): One word more, for signal token, Whistle up the marching tune, With your pike upon your shoulder, At the Rising of the Moon.
SERGEANT: If you don't stop that, I'll arrest you. (A whistle from below answers, repeating the air.)
SERGEANT: That's a signal. (Stands between him and steps.) You must not pass this way. . . . Step farther back. . . . Who are you? You are no ballad-singer.
MAN: You needn't ask who I am; that placard will tell you. (Points to placard.)
SERGEANT: You are the man I am looking for.
MAN: (sings): O, then, tell me, Shawn O'Farrell, Where the gathering is to be. Right well known to you and me!
SERGEANT: Stop that! Stop that, I tell you! (sings louder): One word more, for signal token, Whistle up the marching tune, With your pike upon your shoulder, At the Rising of the Moon.
MAN: You needn't ask who I am; that placard will tell you. (Points to placard.)
SERGEANT: You are the man I am looking for.
MAN: There's a hundred pounds on my head. There is a friend of mine below in a boat. He knows a safe place to bring me to.
SERGEANT: You are the man I am looking for.
MAN: What is that?
SERGEANT: It's my comrades coming.
MAN: You won't betray me . . . the friend of Granuaile. (Slips behind barrel.)
SERGEANT: (as they come in): If he makes his escape it won't be unknown he'll make it.
POLICEMAN X (as they come in): (Slips behind barrel.)
Policeman X (as they come in): If he makes his escape it won't be unknown he'll make it.
SERGEANT: It's my comrades coming.
MAN: You won't betray me . . . the friend of Granuaile.
SERGEANT: (after a pause): That was the last of the placards.
Policeman X (as they come in): If he makes his escape it won't be unknown he'll make it.
SERGEANT: (after a pause): That was the last of the placards.
Policeman X: No one.
Policeman X: No one at all.
SERGEANT: No one at all.
Policeman X: We had no orders to go back to the station; we can stop along with you.
SERGEANT: I don’t want you. There is nothing for you
to do here.
POLICEMAN B: You bade us to come back here and keep
watch with you.
SERGEANT: I’d sooner be alone. Would any man come
this way and you making all that talk? It is better the
place to be quiet.
POLICEMAN B: Well, we’ll leave you the lantern anyhow.
(Hands it to him.)
SERGEANT: I don’t want it. Bring it with you.
POLICEMAN B: You might want it. There are clouds com­
ing up and you have the darkness of the night before
you yet. I’ll leave it over here on the barrel. (Goes to
barrel.)
SERGEANT: Bring it with you, I tell you. No more talk.
POLICEMAN B: Well, I thought it might be a comfort to
you. I often think when I have it in my hand and
can be flashing it about into every dark corner (do­
ing so) that it’s the same as being beside the fire at
home, and the bits of bogwood blazing up now and
again.
(Flashes it about, now on the barrel, now on Sergeant.)
SERGEANT (furious): Be off the two of you, yourselves
and your lantern!
(They go out. Man comes from behind barrel. He and
Sergeant stand looking at one another.)
SERGEANT: What are you waiting for?
MAN: For my hat, of course, and my wig. You wouldn’t
wish me to get my death of cold?
(Sergeant gives them.)
MAN (going toward steps): Well, good night, comrade, and
thank you. You did me a good turn tonight, and I’m
obliged to you. Maybe I’ll be able to do as much for
you when the small rise up and the big fall down . . .
when we all change places at the Rising (waves his
hand and disappears) of the Moon.
SERGEANT (turning his back to audience and reading
placard): A hundred pounds reward! A hundred
pounds! (Turns toward audience.) I wonder, now, am
I as great a fool as I think I am?
Writing about Drama

The act of writing involves making a commitment to ideas, and that commitment helps clarify your thinking. Writing forces you to examine the details, the elements of a play that might otherwise pass unnoticed, and it helps you develop creative interpretations that enrich your appreciation of the plays you read. Besides deepening your own understanding, your writing can contribute to that of your peers and readers, as the commentaries in this book are meant to do.

Because every reader of plays has a unique experience and background, every reader can contribute something to the experience and awareness of others. You will see things that others do not. You will interpret things in a way that others will not. Naturally, every reader's aim is to respect the text, but it is not reasonable to think that there is only one "correct" way to interpret a text. One of the most interesting aspects of writing about drama is that it is usually preceded by discussion, through which a range of possible interpretations begin to appear. When you start to write, you commit yourself to working with certain ideas, and you deepen your thinking about those ideas as you write.

Ordinarily, when you are asked to write about a play, you are expected to produce a critical and analytical study. A critical essay will go beyond simply describing your subjective experience and include a discussion of what the play achieves and how it does so. If you have a choice, you should choose a play that you admire and enjoy. If you have background material on that play, such as a playbill or a newspaper article, or if you have seen a production, these aids will be especially useful in writing.

For a critical study you will need to go far beyond retelling the events of the play. You may have to describe what you believe happens in a given scene or moment, but simply rewriting the plot of the play in your own words does not constitute an interpretation. A critical reading of a play demands that you isolate evidence and comment on it. For example, you may want to quote passages of dialogue or stage directions to point out an essential idea in the drama, but do so in moderation. A string of quotations linked together with a small amount of your commentary will not suffice. Further, make sure that the quotations you use in fact illustrate your point; explain clearly their importance to your discussion.

Many critical approaches are available to the reader of drama. One approach is to emphasize the response of audience members or readers, recognizing that the audience brings a great deal to a play even before the action begins. The audience's or reader's previous experience with drama influences expectations about what will happen on stage and about how the central characters will behave. Personal and cultural biases also influence how an audience member
reacts to the unfolding drama. Reader response criticism pays close attention
to these responses and to what causes them.

Another critical approach is to treat the play as the coherent work of a
playwright who intends the audience to perceive certain meanings in the play.
This approach assumes that a careful analysis, or close reading, of the play will
reveal the author's meanings.

Either approach can lead to engaging essays on drama. In the pages that
follow, you will find directions on how to pay attention to your responses as
an audience member or reader and advice about how to read a play with close
attention to dialogue, images, and patterns of action.

Response criticism depends on a full experience of the text—a good under­
standing of its meaning as well as of its conventions of staging and performance.
Your responses to various elements of the drama, whether the characters,
the setting, the theme, or the dialogue, may change and grow as you see a play
or read it through. You might have a very different reaction to a play during a
second reading or viewing of it. Keeping a careful record of your responses as
you read is a first step in response criticism.

There is, however, a big difference between recording your responses and
examining them. Douglas Atkins of the University of Kansas speaks not only
of reader response in criticism but also of reader responsibility, by which he
means that readers have the responsibility to respond on more than a super­
ficial level when they read drama. This book helps you reach deeper critical
levels because you can read each play in light of the history of drama. This
book also gives you important background material and commentary from
the playwrights and from professional critics. Reading such criticism helps you
understand what the critic's role is and what a critic might say about drama.

Reading drama in a historical perspective is important because it can high­
light similarities between plays of different eras. Anyone who has read Oedipus
Rex and Antigone will be better prepared to respond to Hamlet. The variety
of styles and subject matter of the plays presented in this book gives you the
opportunity to read and respond to a broad range of drama. The more plays
you read carefully, the better you will become at responding to drama and
writing about it.

When you write response criticism, keep these guidelines in mind:

1. As you read, make note of the important effects the text has on you.
   Annotate in the margins moments that are especially effective. Do you
   find yourself alarmed? Disturbed? Sympathetic or unsympathetic to a
   character? Do you sense suspense, or are you confused about what is
   happening? Do you feel personally involved with the action, or does it
   seem to have nothing to do with you? Do you find the situation funny?
   What overall response do you find yourself experiencing?

2. By analyzing the following two elements of your response, establish
   why the play had the effects you experienced. Do you think it would
   have those effects on others? Have you observed that it does?

   First, determine what it is about the play that causes you to have the
   response you do. Is it the structure of the play, the way the characters
   behave or talk? Is it an unusual use of language, allusions to literature
you know (or don’t know)? Is the society portrayed especially familiar (or especially unfamiliar) to you? What does the author seem to expect the audience to know before the play begins?

Second, determine what it is about you, the reader, that causes you to respond as you do. Were you prepared for the dramatic conventions of the play, in terms of its genre as tragedy, comedy, or tragicomedy or in terms of its place in the history of drama? How did your preparation affect your response? Did you have difficulty interpreting the language of the play? Are you especially responsive to certain kinds of plays because of familiarity?

3. What do your responses to the play tell you about your own limitations, your own expertise, your own values, and your own attitudes toward social behavior, uses of language, and your sense of what is “normal”? Be sure to be willing to face your limitations as well as your strengths.1

Reader response criticism is a flexible and useful way to explore possible interpretations of a text. Everyone is capable of responding to drama, and everyone’s response will differ depending on his or her preparation and background.

Close Reading

Analyzing a play by close reading means examining the text in detail, looking for patterns that might not be evident with a less attentive approach to the text. Annotation is the key to close reading, since the critic’s job is to keep track of elements in the play that, incidental though they may seem alone, imply a greater significance when seen together.

Close reading implies rereading, because the first time through a text, you do not know just what will be meaningful as the play unfolds, and you will want to read it again to confirm and deepen your impressions. You will usually make only a few discoveries the first time through. However, it is important to annotate the text even the first time you read it.

In annotating a play, try following these guidelines:

1. Underline all the speeches and images you think are important. Look for dialogue that you think reveals the play’s themes, the true nature of the characters, and the position of the playwright.

2. Watch for repetition of imagery (such as the garden and weed imagery in *Hamlet*)1 and keep track of it through annotation. Do the same for repeated ideas in the dialogue and repeated comments on government or religion or psychology. Such repetitions will reveal the importance of such imagery and ideas to the playwright.

3. Highlight in color (or use some other system) to identify various patterns in the text; then examine each pattern before you begin to plan your essay.

Criticism that uses the techniques of close reading pays very careful attention to the elements of drama — plot, characterization, setting, dialogue (use of

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language), movement, and theme—that were discussed in the first part of the book in relation to Lady Gregory’s *The Rising of the Moon*. As you read a play, keep track of its chief elements; often, they will give you useful ideas for your paper. You may find it helpful to refer to the earlier discussion of the elements in *The Rising of the Moon* (pp. 23–29), because a short critical essay about that play is presented here (pp. 1078–1079).

Annotating the special use of any of the primary elements will help you decide how important they are and whether a close study of them might contribute to an interesting interpretation of the play. You may not want to discuss all the elements in an essay—or, if you do, only one may be truly dominant—but you should be aware of them in any play you write about.

Most good writing results from good planning. When you write criticism about drama, consider these important stages:

1. When possible, choose a play that you enjoy.
2. Annotate the play very carefully.
3. Spend time prewriting.
4. Write a good first draft, then revise for content, organization, style, and mechanics.

The essay on Lady Gregory’s *The Rising of the Moon* later in this section involved several stages of writing. First, the writer read and annotated the play. In the process of doing so, she noticed the unusual stage direction beginning the play, *Moonlight*, and noticed also that when the two policemen leave the Sergeant, they take the lantern, but the Sergeant reminds them that it is very lonely waiting there “with nothing but the moon.” Second, the writer used the stage directions regarding moonlight to guide her in several important techniques of prewriting, including brainstorming, clustering, freewriting, drafting a trial thesis, and outlining.

The first technique, brainstorming, involved listing ideas, words, or phrases suggested by reading the play. The idea of moonlight and the moon recurred often. Then the writer practiced clustering: beginning with *moonlight*, a key term developed from brainstorming, then radiating from it all the associations that naturally suggested themselves. (See the cluster diagram on p. 1077.)

Next the writer chose the term *romance*, which had come to mind during her brainstorming, and performed a freewriting exercise around that term. Freewriting is a technique in which a writer takes four or five minutes to write whatever comes to mind. The technique is intended to be done quickly, so the conscious censor has to be turned off. Anything you write in freewriting may be useful, because you may produce ideas you did not know you had.

The following passage is part of the freewriting the student did using *romance* as a key term. The passage is also an example of “invisible writing”: the writing was done on a computer and the student turned off the monitor so that she could not censor or erase what she was writing. She could only go forward, as fast as possible!

From Prewriting to Final Draft: A Sample Essay on *The Rising of the Moon*
The setting of the play is completely romantic. In a lot of ways the play wouldn't work in a different setting. When you think about it the moon in the title is what makes all the action possible. Moon associated with darkness, underworld, world of fairies, so the moon is what makes all the action possible. Moon makes Sergeant look at things differently. The moon is the rebel moon—that's what title means. Rebel moon is rising, always rising. So the world the policeman lives in—sun lights up everything in practical and nonromantic way—is like lantern that second policeman brings to dockside. It shows things in a harsh light. Moon shows things in soft light. Without the moon there would be a different play.

The freewriting gave the writer a new direction—discussing the setting of the play, especially the role of light. Thus, the writer's clustering began with the moon, veered off to the concept of the romantic elements in the play, and then came back to the way the moon and the lantern function in the play. The writer was now ready to work up a trial thesis:

Lady Gregory uses light to create a romantic setting that helps us understand the relationship between the rebel and the Sergeant and the values that they each stand for.

Because a writer drafts a thesis before writing an essay, the thesis is like a trial balloon. It may work or it may not. At this point it gives the writer direction.
Next, the student outlined her essay. Because she did not know the outcome of the essay yet, her outline was necessarily sketchy:

I. Moonlight is associated with romance and rebellion; harsh light of lantern is associated with repressiveness of police.
   A. Rebel is associated with romance.
   B. Sergeant is associated with practicality and the law.

II. Without the lantern the Sergeant is under the influence of the romantic moon and the rebel.
    A. Sergeant feels resentment about his job.
    B. Rebel sings forbidden song and Sergeant reveals his former sympathies.
    C. Sergeant admits he was romantic when young.

III. Sergeant must choose between moon and lantern.
    A. Sergeant seems ready to arrest rebel.
    B. When police return with lantern the Sergeant sends them away.
    C. Rebel escapes and Sergeant remains in moonlight.

The prewriting strategies of brainstorming, clustering, freewriting, drafting a thesis, and outlining helped the student generate ideas and material for her first draft. After writing this draft, she revised it carefully for organization, clarity, expression, punctuation, and format. What follows is her final draft.

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19 October

The Use of Light in *The Rising of the Moon*

Lady Gregory uses light imagery in *The Rising of the Moon* to contrast rebellion and repressiveness. Her initial stage direction is basic: *Moonlight*. She suggests some of the values associated with moonlight, such as rebellion and romance, caution and secrecy, daring exploits, and even the underworld. All these are set against the policemen, who are governed not by the moon, which casts shadows and makes the world look magical, but by the lantern, which casts a harsh light that even the Sergeant eventually rejects.

The ballad singer, the rebel, is associated with romance from the start: "Dark hair — dark eyes, smooth face... There isn't another man in Ireland would have broken jail the way he did" (26). He is dark, handsome, and recklessly brave. The Sergeant, by contrast, is a practical man, no romantic. He sees that he might have a chance to arrest the rebel and gain the reward for his capture if he stays right on the quay, a likely place for the rebel to escape from. But he unknowingly spoils his chances by refusing to keep the lantern the policemen offer. He tells the policemen, "You can take the lantern. Don't be too long now. It's very lonesome here with nothing but the moon" (26).
What he does not realize is that with the lantern as his guiding light, he will behave like a proper Sergeant. But with the moon to guide him, he will side with the rebel.

It takes only a few minutes for the rebel to show up on the scene. At first, the Sergeant is very tough and abrupt with the rebel, who is disguised as “Jimmy Walsh, a ballad singer.” The rebel tells the Sergeant that he is a traveler, that he is from Ennis, and that he has been to Cork. Unlike the Sergeant, who has stayed in one place and is a family man, the ballad singer appears to be a romantic figure, in the sense that he follows his mind to go where he wants to, sings what he wants to, and does what he wants to.

When the ballad singer begins singing, the Sergeant reacts badly, telling the singer, “Stop that noise” (26). Maybe he is envious of the ballad singer’s freedom. When the Sergeant tries to make the rebel leave, the rebel instead begins telling stories about the man the Sergeant is looking for. He reminds the Sergeant of deeds done that would frighten anyone. “It was after the time of the attack on the police barracks at Kilmallock.... Moonlight... just like this” (27). The moonlight of the tale and the moonlight of the setting combine to add mystery and suspense to the situation.

The effect of the rebel’s talk — and of the moonlight — is to make the Sergeant feel sorry for himself in a thankless job. “It’s little we get but abuse from the people, and no choice but to obey our orders,” he says bitterly while sitting on the barrel sharing a pipe with the singer (27). When the rebel sings an illegal song, the Sergeant corrects a few words, revealing his former sympathies with the people. The rebel realizes this, telling the Sergeant, “It was with the people you were, and not with the law you were, when you were a young man” (28). The Sergeant admits that when he was young he too was a romantic, but now that he is older he is practical and law-abiding: “Well, if I was foolish then, that time’s gone.... I have my duties and I know them” (28).

Pulled by his past and his present, the Sergeant is suddenly forced to choose when the ballad singer’s signal to his friend reveals the singer’s identity to the Sergeant. He must decide whether his heart is with the world of moonlight or the world of the lantern. He seizes the rebel’s hat and wig and seems about to arrest him when the policemen, with their lantern, come back. The Sergeant orders the policemen back to the station, and they offer to leave the lantern with him. But the Sergeant refuses. We know that he will not turn the rebel in. He has chosen the world of moonlight, of the rebel.

Before they leave the policemen try to make the world of the lantern seem the right choice. Policeman B says:

Well, I thought it might be a comfort to you. I often think when I have it in my hand and can be flashing it about into every dark corner (doing so) that it’s the same as being beside the fire at home, and the bits of bogwood blazing up now and again. (Flashes it about, now on the barrel, now on Sergeant.) (29)

The Sergeant reacts furiously and tells them to get out — “yourselves and your lantern!”

The play ends with the Sergeant giving the hat and wig back to the rebel, obviously having chosen the side of the people. When the rebel leaves, the Sergeant wonders if he himself was crazy for losing his chance at the reward. But as the curtain goes down, the Sergeant is still in the moonlight.