

SUBJECT: ENGLISH LITERATURE
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CLASS - B.A. II YEAR PAPER - I

Points to be discussed:

	THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF THE DRAMA DEFINITION OF DRAMA THE GREEK ORIGIN OF THE DRAMA LITURGY AND THE BIBLE (THE GOSPEL) THE MYSTERY PLAYS, THE MIRACLE AND MORALITY PLAYS
	THE GREEK DRAMA OR THE CLASSICAL DRAMA, THE CHORUS
ARISTOTLE	THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES TO ACHIEVE DRAMATIC UNITY: THE UNITY OF TIME, THE UNITY OF PLACE, THE UNITY OF ACTION.
	THE FIVE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT IN DRAMA 1 - THE EXPOSITION OR THE BEGINNING 2 - THE RISING ACTION 3 - THE CRISIS OR THE CLIMAX 4 - THE FALLING ACTION 5 - DENOUEMENT OR THE CLOSE OR CATASTROPHE

INTRODUCTION

I

THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF THE DRAMA

Dramatic art originated in the natural instinct which men and women have to imitate. The child learns largely by imitating the actions of elders. Simple people like to imitate, in dialogue and act, the deeds of heroes of whom they have heard, or the gods in quasi-human form whom they have formed for themselves. It is all a case of pretending to be something else. Our word "hypocrite", now used to denote a person who pretends to be what he is not, or to feel what he does not feel, meant in the Greek language an actor in drama.

The early history of Greek village communities records simple forms of dramatic acting. When a festival of one of their numerous gods was celebrated, they would form a group and pretend to be the gods. There seems to have been plenty of dialogue and recitation but little action. These imitations were called "mimes", and we see in this name the derivation of our words "mimic" and "imitate". They were usually humorous, and men in ridiculous costumes imitated, even parodied the old gods. Out of this practice rose a crude form of comedy which entertained the people of the old Athenian community, and some kind of holiday play-acting went on till the days of the Roman empire. When the new religion, Christianity, arose, its customs were held up to ridicule before the Romans on a primitive outdoor stage. The Romans carried some form of drama to the countries they occupied, but it died out when their legions were withdrawn from the outposts to defend Rome against the barbarians.

There was a long period after the departure of the Romans, known in history as the Dark Ages. The peoples of Europe lived

in strife and anxiety, devoid of secular learning or culture, as cultivated ground which is neglected passes again into jungle. In the sixth and seventh centuries, the drama, like other forms of art, was neglected. From then onwards, England and France saw the rise of little groups of travelling entertainers, whom the French named *jongleurs*. They toured the country, visiting villages and the mansions of nobles, giving simple shows in which the main interest was imitation of the daily social life and manners of the times. Artistically they were little advanced in comparison with the mimes of the ancient Greeks

The plays of those itinerant players, and the pleasure which their shows brought to the country-people, attracted the notice of the church, which had by then become a powerful influence on national life. Perhaps, the monks thought that they could give a better kind of entertainment, and also combine religious instruction with amusement. They set up plays of a sacred nature, drawn from that great treasury of action, the Bible. At first it meant no more than giving a dramatic turn to the church services in important festivals such as Christmas or Easter. On Easter Sunday, Christians have a special service to commemorate the rising of Christ from the tomb, three days after His crucifixion and death. The four writers of the Gospels tell us that when three women followers of our Lord came to the Sepulchre to remove the body, they found an angel on guard who gave them the information that Christ had risen and was living. The old monks threw this into truly dramatic form. One priest took his stance by the altar, understood for the time being to represent the Ho'y Sepulchre. Three others, representing the women-disciples, came up the aisle towards him, and the following dialogue took place:

1st Priest. What seek ye in this sepulchre, O Christian women?

3 Priests. We seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, O Heavenly One.

1st Priest. He is not here. He has arisen from the tomb, even as He foretold to you He would do.

Here we see the germ of dramatic presentation. In course of time, efforts became more ambitious, and events other than those of Bible history were shown to the people in the church. Since the Bible was of universal interest and other literature was

The
Miracle
Plays

scarce, other bodies than the churchmen also took up episodes from the Bible as incidents fit for dramatic presentation. A favourite one was the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, when

God divided the waters of the Red Sea to facilitate their escape and to manifest His power. Another play showed the shepherds of Bethlehem watching their flocks by night, and keeping a look-out for the star in the east that was to herald the coming of the Messiah. In rough and simple form, and on primitive stages, or on no stage at all, those were put on to entertain the people. Since many of them showed the wonderful works performed by Christ, called His miracles, the name of *Miracle Plays* came to be given to this kind of primitive drama.

It may be that men, tired of amusement with too much of religious teaching in it, wanted something more light and entertaining. At any rate, some producers started to introduce into the Bible stories additional characters and events of their own making. This is a legitimate device, freely used by writers of the historical novel and drama in modern times. An early effort is called *The Second Shepherds' Play*, in which the shepherds of Bethlehem guard their flocks and watch for the star of the old prophecy. But the writer has added a fictional character, Mak, who steals sheep and makes remarks calculated to amuse and create laughter. This is the beginning of Comedy in English Drama, and in Mak we have the forerunner of the Shakespearean clown.

From the beginning of the fourteenth century, there was a tendency in European literature to make all writings allegoric

and didactic. A story always contained an implied moral lesson. Characters in story or drama were made types of virtue or vice, showing the conflict that always goes on between good and evil. The old familiar Bible characters gave way to symbolic creations, personified virtues and vices, and on the stage there spoke and acted Love, Kindness, Sloth and Drunkenness. Of course, the good qualities were triumphant in the end, and the bad characters were defeated. Because of their moral teaching, those plays were called "Moralities".

We commented on the natural practice of inserting a humorous episode to relieve the tedium of a staid miracle or morality play. Since such inserted episodes were sometimes performed during the interval or "half-time" of a serious play, they were called Interludes. Though this was usually an additional item to relieve seriousness, it often happened that the audiences came to enjoy the Interlude more than the main play. Such insets grew to be more than an addition to a dull Morality, and were at times played alone and for amusement without instruction. In some of them, characters began to emerge who were human personages and not symbols of virtues and vices. In a sense they were still types of a class, rather than individuals, and in one such play, *The Four P's*; the characters are named the Pedlar, the Palmer, the Pardoner and the Potheary. No longer is the drama a medium for religious instruction; it deals with men and women, their problems and their conflicts in the world.

The Greek drama had reached a high point, but seemed to have died out with the Greek empire. Scholars of Oxford and Cambridge had studied and tried to revive it, and to write dramas on the same model. Greek tragedy was influenced by the conception of a pantheon of many gods who lived on Olympus under the fatherly rule of Jupiter. There were Phoebus, Apollo, Poseidon, Artemis, and Diana the Moon-Goddess. The Greek gods were glorified humans; they loved, quarrelled and fought among

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themselves. They intervened in human affairs, with intentions sometimes friendly and sometimes hostile.

The motive of Greek tragedy was that a man or woman came to ruin because of the enmity of an angry god. Ulysses suffered many hardships because he had offended an implacable goddess. Greek tragedy conceived of a highly-placed person coming to disaster and downfall because of divine vindictiveness and not through any fault of his own. The prevailing element is Destiny, the cruelty of hostile *karma*, the powerful forces which can work against a man. Greek comedy was simpler, an effort to show contemporary life and manners, ridicule social faults and caricature human types. Tragedy and comedy never combined in the same play. The Greeks believed that they could not flourish side by side.

The Classical Drama of the Greeks had not much action, but was mainly one of dialogue and recitation. At times an interval of many years had to be accounted for, between the youth and old age of a particular character. In such circumstances, the interval was bridged over by the Chorus, either a group of actors or of vestal virgins, who came on the stage and chanted an explanation or summary of the events that had taken place in those intervening years, and commented on the acts of the characters, and their consequences. In this way, the Chorus solved the problem of presenting in a few hours events which were supposed to cover a life time. The Chorus might be thought an inartistic expedient, but it represented the germ out of which the classical drama grew, and it was retained to the end, though in gradually reduced form.

One of the greatest Greek critics and philosophers was Aristotle. He formulated the rules setting forth three basic principles to achieve dramatic unity:

1. *The Time Unity.* The time-duration of the action of a drama should be no more than a single day.

2. *The Unity of Place.* The action of the drama must take place in one location, and not move from one place to another.
3. *The Unity of Action.* There must be a single or main story as plot, and no minor or subordinate plot.

Those principles were meant to ensure dramatic unity, since there was a danger that a drama might become a loose series of events if the art of the playwright were allowed too much scope. Aristotle similarly sketched the course which the average drama followed. It was in five stages:

1. *The Exposition.* This shows the opening situation, and in it the audience is informed of the causes which lead to the commencement of dramatic action.
2. *The Rising Action.* Here the action started by the Exposition moves forward.
3. *The Crisis or Climax.* The action of the drama reaches its highest point, the causes in the Exposition having now reached an effect.
4. *The Falling Action.* The interest becomes less intense and strained as the ultimate result becomes visible.
5. *The Close or Catastrophe,* in which the final results are presented.

It is not easy to apply this five-stage division to all plays, but it may have influenced those editors who divided Shakespeare's plays into five acts. Shakespeare made no such arrangement. The climax of a Shakespearean drama is not always in the middle of the play, but may be earlier or later. It is very late in *Othello*, and early in *Macbeth*.

The Greeks aimed at dramatic unity through control of form and construction. Shakespeare thought he could achieve his results by creating lifelike characters and showing them in natural

talk and action. It is, therefore, not a legitimate criticism to say that Shakespeare has disregarded one or another of the Aristotelian Unities, because he regarded them not at all. Shakespeare's dramas have often a Greek atmosphere because there is a sense of fate, a feeling of strong hostile outside forces which affect the life of man. The powers that drive on Othello or Macbeth to the final downfall are as implacable as the offended god in a Greek tragedy; but as regards time-duration, place and action, most English dramatists have refused to be bound by formal limitations. Some of Shakespeare's dramas extend over many days, some extend over years. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the action obviously covers a long period, as well as in *Lear* and *Othello*, but it is not defined, and the events are marshalled so swiftly that the over-all impression is of rapid and continuous action. In the Roman and in historical plays, the action takes place in different countries. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cymbeline*, and *Lear*, as in *Twelfth Night*, there are two sets of characters and two actions in the early part of the play, which come together and fuse to form complete unity in the long run.

There is no secondary story in *Macbeth*, in *Hamlet*, or in *Othello*. These three tragedies have one motive, and that is the trials and fortunes of the central figure who gives his name to the play. In all of them changes in the scene of action do not at all affect the continuity of the theme, and the time-duration is artistically made to seem brief, though we know it is long.