Elements of Drama

Drama on stage often reflects the drama of everyday life, but (just like other forms of literature and art) it concentrates life, focuses it, and holds it up for examination. Since plays are written with the intention of performance, the reader of the play must use her imagination to enact the play as she reads it. Readers of the play need to imagine not just feelings or a flow of action, but how the action and the characters look in a theater, on a stage, before a live audience.

Audience
The fact of a live audience also has an important impact on the way plays are created. The essential feature of an audience involves the fact that they have, at a single instant, a common experience; they have assembled for the explicit purpose of seeing a play. Drama not only plays before a live audience of real people who respond directly and immediately to it, but drama is also conceived by the author with the expectation of a specific response. Authors calculate for the effect of a community of watchers rather than for the silent response. With this in mind, most plays written deal with topics that are timely.

Dialogue
Dialogue provides the substance of a play. Each word uttered by the character furthers the business of the play, contributes to its effect as a whole. Therefore, a sense of DECORUM must be established by the characters, i.e., what is said is appropriate to the role and situation of a character. Also the exposition of the play often falls on the dialogue of the characters. Remember exposition establishes the relationships, tensions or conflicts from which later plot developments derive.

Plot
The interest generated by the plot varies for different kinds of plays. (See fiction elements on plot for more information regarding plot.) The plot is usually structured with acts and scenes.

- Open conflict plays: rely on the suspense of a struggle in which the hero, through perhaps fight against all odds, is not doomed.

- Dramatic thesis: foreshadowing, in the form of ominous hints or symbolic incidents, conditions the audience to expect certain logical developments.

- Coincidence: sudden reversal of fortune plays depict climatic ironies or misunderstandings.

- Dramatic irony: the fulfillment of a plan, action, or expectation in a surprising way, often opposite of what was intended.
Stagecraft
The stage creates its effects in spite of, and in part because of, definite physical limitations. Setting and action tend to be suggestive rather than panoramic or colossal. Both setting and action may be little more than hints for the spectator to fill out.

Convention
The means the playwright employs are determined at least in part by dramatic convention.

- **Greek**: Playwrights of this era often worked with familiar story material, legend about gods and famous families that the audience was familiar with. Since the audience was familiar with certain aspects of these, the playwrights used allusion rather than explicit exposition. In representing action, they often relied on messengers to report off-stage action. For interpretation the Greeks relied on the **CHORUS**, a body of onlookers, usually citizens or elders, whose comments on the play reflected reactions common to the community. These plays were written in metered verse arranged in elaborate stanzas. This required intense attention from the audience.

- **English Drama**: Minor characters play an important role in providing information and guiding interpretation. The confidant, a friend or servant, listens to the complaints, plans and reminiscences of a major character. Minor characters casually comment among themselves on major characters and plot development. Extended **SOLILOQUY** enables a major character to reveal his thoughts in much greater detail than in natural dialogue. **ASIDES**, remarks made to the audience but not heard by those on the stage, are common.

- **Realism**: Toward the end of the nineteenth century, realistic depiction of everyday life entered the genre of drama, whereas the characters may be unconventional and their thoughts turbulent and fantasy-ridden.

- **Contemporary**: Experimentation seems to be the key word here. A **NARRATOR** replaces the messenger, the chorus and the confidant. **FLASHBACKS** often substitute for narration. Many contemporary playwrights have abandoned recognizable setting, chronological sequence and characterization through dialogue.

Genres
Just as there are various types of novels, i.e., western, romance, science fiction, there are different genres of plays. While it is difficult at times to place many latter day plays into a specific genre, seeing the attributes will enable the reader to understand the particular play better.
**Tragedy:** In classic tragedy and the modern problem play, tragedy is a play in which a central character faces, and is finally defeated by, some overwhelming threat or disaster. The hero or heroine is an active participant in the event through a tragic flaw, a shortcoming of the protagonist, i.e., pride, rashness, indecision. This reinforces the emphasis on action derived from character, which explains the psychological and moral interest of much great drama. Another common type of tragedy focuses not on how the protagonist brings about but on how he meets his fate. Tragedy so defined celebrates the triumph of the human spirit over physical necessity.

*Comedy:* Different kinds of comedy illustrate different ways a playwright may leaven grim truth with humor or temper the playful with the serious. Traditionally comedy is defined as a play that bestows on its characters good fortune, or more popularly, a happy ending. It may deal with the loves and jealousies of the young, and the reluctance other elders to give their blessings or the necessary funds.

**Characterization**
A playwright's success ultimately depends on his ability to create a character that an actor can "bring to life." The playwright's ability to match the *protagonist* against an *antagonist* of some complexity and vitality can make the difference between a success and failure. *Idiom,* a character' personal thoughts and feelings as reflected through dialogue.