

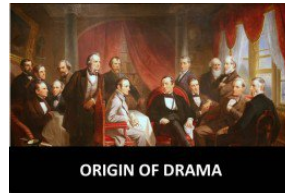


Origin of Drama in English Literature

Updated on October 28, 2015

The Origin of Drama

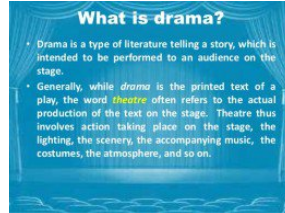
The origin of the drama is deep-rooted in the religious predispositions of mankind. Same is the case not only with English drama, but with dramas of other nations as well. The ancient Greek and Roman dramas were mostly concerned with religious ceremonials of people. It was the religious elements that resulted into the development of drama. As most of the Bible was written into Latin, common people could not understand its meanings. That's why; the clergy tried to find out some new methods of teaching and expounding the teachings of Bible to the common people. For this purpose, they developed a new method, wherein the stories of the Gospel were explained through the living pictures. The performers acted out the story in a dumb show.



Development of Drama | [Source](#)

Origin of Drama: Mysteries and Miracle Plays

In the next stage, the actors spoke as well as acted their parts. Special plays were written by the clerics, at first in Latin and later in the vernacular French. These early plays were known as Mysteries or Miracles. The very word *Mystery* shows its ecclesiastical origin, since the word comes from the French *Mystere* derived from *ministere*, because the clergy, the ministerium or *ministry ecclesiae*, themselves took part in these plays. In England the term Miracle is used indiscriminately for any kind of religion play, but the strictly speaking the term *Mystery* is applied to the stories taken from the Scriptures narrative, while *Miracles* are plays dealing with incidents in the lives of Saints and Martyrs.



Development of Drama | [Source](#)

Mystery/Miracle plays

- Plays/pageants telling the story of the Nativity were popular
- Performed outdoors by professional or semi-professional troupes
- Complaints - tone down Herod's massacre of innocents



Origin of Drama | [Source](#)

Origin of Drama: Secular and Religious Origin of Drama

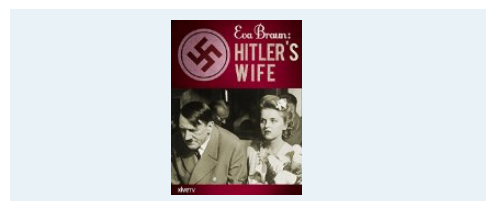
The history of drama is deeply rooted in lay and religious annals of history. It may be well at this point to sketch the main lines of development, before dealing in greater detail with the early plays that merged gradually into Elizabethan drama. Pausing them to consider the lines of development shown by the drama from Plantagenet times down to the era of Elizabeth, we find certain distinctive stages, whilst underlying the entire movement is a twofold appeal. The drama appeals to two instincts deeply rooted: i. The craving for amusement ii. The desire for improvement. This twofold appeal accounts for the complex origin of the drama, and enables us to differentiate the lay from the sacred element.

Origin of Drama: Drama as Entertainment

Regarding the lay element and the craving for amusement, we note that in the Middle Ages, the juggler, the tumbler and jester ministered to the needs of the time. They are found in the twelfth century, and Langland tells us how gaily and unblushingly they flourished in the fourteenth century, though the serious-minded, wished to restrain them to a modest hilarity. Much of it was very primitive fooling, but there were dialogues and repartees of which fragments only have survived. The Middle Ages solely needed a Pepys. Of these entertainers, the jester was the best. He lived by his wits in a very literal manner, disgrace and death following upon an unsuccessful sally, and he survived into Shakespeare's day, though fallen then from his high state to play the fool between the acts of a play. What he had been at this zenith we may judge from the picture of Touchstone, of Feste, and the Fool in Lear. Such debates as *The Owl and Nightingale* influenced the development of the drama; for before Chaucer's time some of these were turned into story.

Origin of Drama: Importance of the Pageants

The most important entertainments of the Middle Ages, however, were supplied by the Pageants and the May Games, and by the Mysteries and Miracles of the Church. Roughly speaking, we may say that the Juggling and Clowning heralded the coming of Farce and Comedy, the Pageants anticipated the Historical Drama, while in the May Games we have a foretaste of



the Masques and Pastoral Plays so popular in Elizabethan times.

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Origin of Drama: Drama inside the Church

Passing from the lay to the sacred element, it is remarkable what use the Church made of the rough humorous already noted in the clowning and debates. The Church made skillful use of these, moulding them to her purpose and, in the parlance of a familiar tag, combining instruction with amusement. Drama is obviously inherent in the very ritual of the Church, and the Mass itself was factor in dramatic development. The season of the year suggested the subject matter of plays: Christmas, Easter, stories derived from the Bible, called Mysteries, stories from the lives of the Saints, called Miracle Plays. Early in the Middle Ages the clergy celebrated Holy Days. Christmas, Easter, etc, by playing scenes from the Life of Christ. The first positive stage in the development of the drama is marked by the performance of these stories in the Church.

Origin of Drama: From the Church to the Market Place

The second stage is reached when the play emerges from the Church into the market place. This was effected when the guilds were entrusted with the performances in the fourteenth century. It was customary for each craft to represent a play according to its particular trade. The work was very seriously taken by the guilds, lack of confidence and competence and unpunctuality being met by heavy fines.

view quiz statistics

Origin of Drama: Stage Properties Introduced

Performances were given on car or scaffolds in the open spaces of the town. There was no attempt at scenery, but attention was giving to stage properties. There was a monstrous head with a movable jaws to represent Hall; and in addition to a rich costume the actor had some symbol to denote his part.

Origin of Drama: Element of Humour

The play of Noah shows us the amalgamation of English humour and didactic purpose. Though, the drama had its source in holy story, in the method of narration we can trace the influence of the old English amusements-the pageants and May games, the juggler's horse-play, and the quips of the jester. On the whole, Miracle plays proved more popular than Mysteries, probably on account of their fresher subject matter. Each big town possessed its own cycle of plays i.e., York, Chester, Coventry.

Origin of Drama: The Morality Plays

The third stage is the rise of Morality Plays. The Mystery and Miracle Paly gave rise to the Morality and Interlude. In the Miracle and Mystery plays, serious and comic elements were interwoven. Now they part; the Morality presenting the serious and the Interlude the higher side of things. The Morality was frankly didactic. The characters typified certain qualities e.g., Sin, Grace, Repentance. The Interlude aimed merely at amusement. *Everyman* and *Four P's* of Heywood are best examples in this regard.

Poll:

English drama born inside the Church?

Yes.

No.

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Moralities began to be acted in the reign of Henry VI and like the miracle plays continued to flourish until the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. The morality, as we have said, is a drama in which the characters are allegorical, symbolical, or abstract. The main purpose of the play is didactic. The allegorical characters to be found in some of the earlier Miracle plays owe their importance to religious sources. They are not essential to the story. One of the earliest morality plays was *The Castle of Perseverance*, a drama of the old faith. The spiritual progress of mankind from the day of his birth to the Day of Judgment is set forth in this drama.

Origin of Drama: The Interludes

The Interludes dealing with the Old Faith gave place to others that set forth the teaching of Reformation, e.g. *Hychc Scornor*, *Lusty Taventres*, *New Custom* etc. Others concerned the New Learning, *Nature of the Four Elements*, *The Trial of Treasure* etc.

Origin of Drama: Emergence of Modern Drama

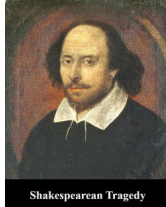
The Moralities with their allegorical characters led to greater attention being paid to the plot, whilst gradually the abstract personification began to emerge into real people with individual idiosyncrasies. The Moralities, like the Miracles, were adapted to the audience. Comic scenes were introduced to relieve the seriousness of these medieval "problem" plays. The Vice, a character peculiar to the Morality, was allowed to enter between the scenes and amuse the people with a character. A number of plays exist in which the transition stages of the Morality can be plainly discerned. Comedy and Morality in *Town Tiler and his Wife*, Tragedy and Morality in *King Canbyses* and *Apilus and Virginia*, History and Morality in Bales's *King Johan*.

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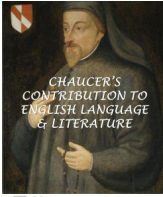
Shakespearean Tragedy

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THE WORKS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespearean Tragedy: Definition and Characteristics of Shakespearean Tragedy

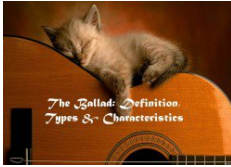
Shakespearean tragedy is a play penned by Shakespeare himself or by another in the style of Shakespeare. Shakespearean tragedy is different from other kinds of tragedies in its structure and features.



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ENGLISH LITERATURE

Chaucer's Contribution to English Language & Literature

Chaucer's Contribution to English Language & Literature is of paramount importance in the history of English literature. It was Chaucer who transformed English into a full fledged language.



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NARRATIVE POETRY

The Ballad: Definition, Types & Characteristics

The word ballad has been taken from Latin word ballare, which means dancing song. Ballad is a shorter narrative poem, which comprises of short stanzas. Ballad is a poem, which is meant for singing.